Celebrating 100 issues with 100 pages!

Realms of Fantasy

Fiction
Seven New Stories

Poetry
Ursula K. Le Guin

Folkroots
Fairies and Fairylands

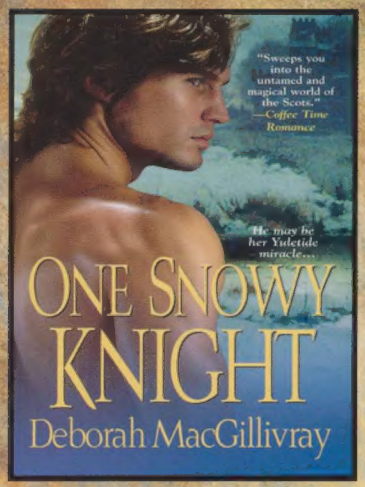
Artists Gallery
Petar Meseldžija

June 2011

$6.99 US
$7.99 CA

0 74470 02291 6 06

Visit us online at www.rofmag.com


"Sweeps you into the untamed and magical world of the Scots."
—Coffee Time Romance
He may be her Yuletide miracle...
ONE SNOWY KNIGHT
Deborah MacGillivray

One Snowy Knight

The Dragons of Challon Series.
by Deborah MacGillivray
ISBN: 9781420104509
Historical, Holiday

Lady Skena Maclain has seen much hardship this year, and she fears worse is to come. For a bloody battle in Dunbar has left her a young widow, and her Scottish fortress without protectors. She wishes she could be as hopeful as her babes, who believe the Cailleach, the Lady of Winter, will send them a miracle in time for Christmas. But life has taught her that things can never be so easy...Until a mysterious warrior is found amid a blinding snowstorm, sick with fever. As Skena nurses the handsome knight back to health, even she begins to believe he might bring salvation to her little keep - and passion to her life, as his body awakens a long sleeping desire within her...a desire her touch stirs in him as well. But his wounds speak of danger, and Skena will soon learn, his past carries a secret that could shake her home - and her heart - to their very core.

http://deborahmacgillivray.co.uk/

Dawn of the Seraphs

Immortal Fire series
by Adrianne Brennan
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-60054-402-6
Print ISBN: 978-1-60054-372-2
Gay (m/m)/Sci-fi/Futuristic/Paranormal/Erotic Romance

Tamar is a Seraph, a member of an influential organization of powerful psychics known as ANGEL. Seraphs are humans who have evolved to have varying psychic abilities. Possessing a greater lifespan and intelligence than ordinary humans, Seraphs within ANGEL grow to their full potential through study and practice.

In the year 4287 on planet Earth, ANGEL has deteriorated to become the harbor of the bored elite. A small but passionate rebellion rises to take back the power they once held. In pursuit of his own dreams, Tamar is caught in the chaotic struggle for evolution, power, and to define the greater good.

Kir, an old rival from his days as an apprentice within ANGEL, resurfaces, threatening to shred Tamar's world into bits...along with his heart. Their ideals clash, and a bitter fight ensues between them. Can Tamar's courage save Kir from the darkness which plagues him while remaining true to himself and what he holds dear?

http://www.adriannebrennan.com/dawnoftheseraphs.html

Feral Fever

the Feral Series
by Skhye Moncrief
Paranormal/Futuristic Romance

Blessed are those who just give in to the darkness.

With the Blood Wars ended, were-assassin Marshals are called to serve throughout the universe in easing cultural tensions instigated by the transition of cultures from zombified to free-thinking societies…

Earthling archaeologist Aisling Bjorn never really considered juggling multiple husbands for were-assassin duty on planet Luvk—a world of tiger folk subjugated by winged aliens from another dimension. Learning the lost history of the tiger culture to understand how the winged species divided and conquered the tiger realms is more her cup of tea. But she's in store for an even bigger challenge than helping the Luvks reclaim their independence. There's a shortage of marriageable females for the large broods of gorgeous tiger princes. The friction caused by mating problems threatens her sanity as the warrior Lords vie for possession of not only a mate but a powerful political pawn—her, the Marshal whose beauty rivals that of the most marketable princess. And mates the Lords all wish to be.

Aisling must accept that with every turn in life, we sacrifice a bit of our souls for the greater good. Even to the darkness. Blessed are those who just give into the darkness of Luvk. Because a woman's sanity is out of the question when surrounded by enormous muscled hunks cloaked in sexy leather pants. Their glorious bodies alone could incite riots on Earth. And they all want her. One thing's for certain, love or lust, everyone eventually succumbs to Luvks' FERAL FEVER.

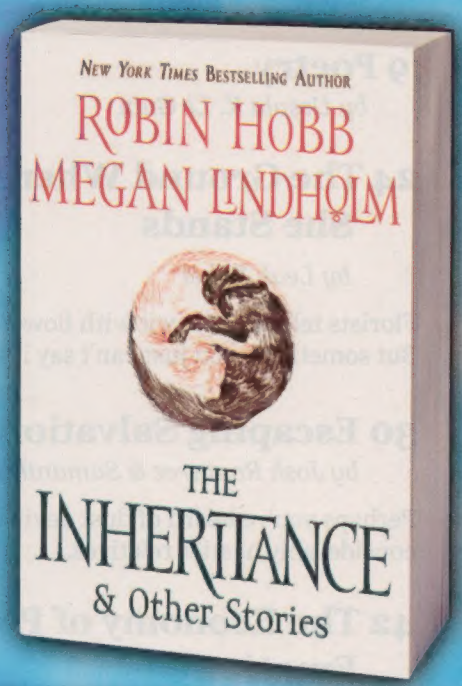
Buy from New Concepts Publishing at http://www.newconceptspublishing.com/books/FeralFever.html
www.skhyemoncrief.com

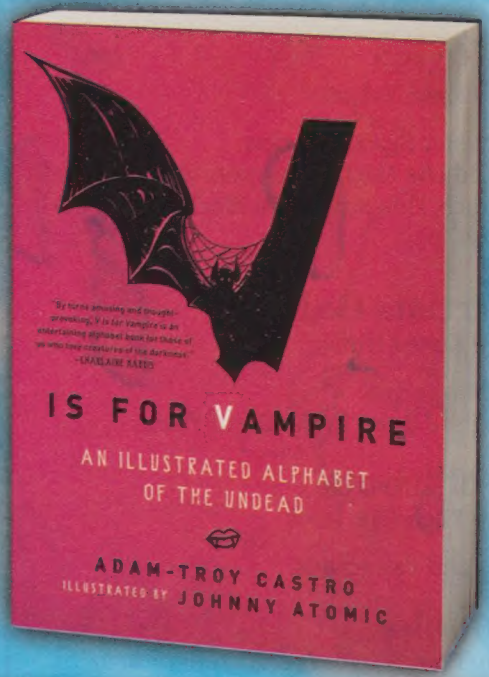
Destination: IMAGINATION

HARPER Voyager

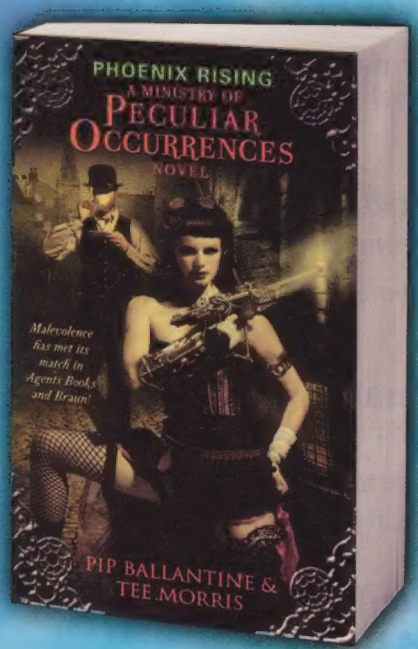
A stunning new collection of short fiction from the master storyteller

"She continues to occupy a perch at or near the top among contemporary fantasists."
—Booklist



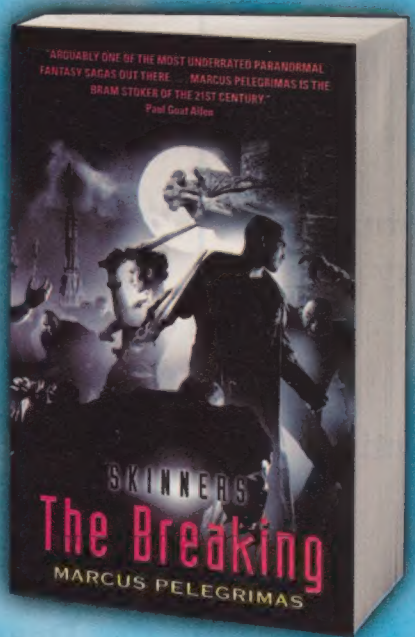


"By turns amusing and thought-provoking, an entertaining alphabet book for those of us who love creatures of the darkness."
—Charlaine Harris


PHOENIX RISING
A MINISTRY OF PECULIAR OCCURRENCES NOVEL
Malevolence has met its match in Agents Books and Braun!
PIP BALLANTINE & TEE MORRIS

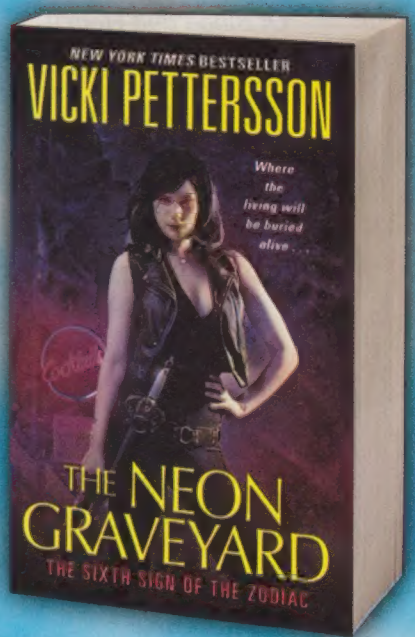
A Ministry of Peculiar Occurrences Novel

This rip-roaring, hilarious, steampunk romp features two delightful secret agents on the trail of a startling conspiracy.


"ARGUABLY ONE OF THE MOST UNDERRATED PARANORMAL FANTASY SAGAS OUT THERE.... MARCUS PELEGRIMAS IS THE BRAM STOKER OF THE 21ST CENTURY."
Paul Goat Allen
SKINNERS
The Breaking
MARCUS PELEGRIMAS

Skinners Book Five

"Arguably one of the most underrated paranormal fantasy sagas out there.... Marcus Pelegrimas is the Bram Stoker of the 21st Century."
—Paul Goat Allen


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
VICKI PETTERSSON
Where the living will be buried alive...
THE NEON GRAVEYARD
THE SIXTH SIGN OF THE ZODIAC

The dramatic finale of the Zodiac series

"Pettersson's paranormal world is as original as it is compelling.... Like Las Vegas itself, this is an adventure that'll keep you up all night."
—Kelley Armstrong

HARPER Voyager

www.harpervoyagerbooks.com

Columns

10 Movies
by Resa Nelson

Blockbuster Season Begins.
Thor and His Mighty Hammer Stand Poised To Launch This Summer's Blockbuster Season

48 Artists Gallery
by Karen Haber

Petar Meseldžija:
Putting the Color in the Right Place

16 Folkroots
by Theodora Goss

Fairies and Fairylands

88 Books
by Paul Witcover & Elizabeth Bear

Of Blood and Honey
Hidden Cities
God's War
The Cloud Roads
Deathless

94 Paranormal Romance & Urban Fantasy
by Elizabeth Bear

Welcome to Bordertown
Desdaemona

96 Young Adult Fiction
by Michael M. Jones

The Iron Thorn
Teeth
Rage
Tiger's Curse
Angel Burn
Falling Under
After Midnight
A Long, Long Sleep

100 Graphic Novels
by Andrew Wheeler

Mercy Thompson: Moon Called, Volume One
Dungeon Quest, Book Two

Poetry and Fiction

9 Poetry
by Ursula K. Le Guin

24 The Ground Whereon She Stands
by Leah Bobet

Florists tell us to "Say it with flowers."
But sometimes you just can't say it at all.

30 Escaping Salvation
by Josh Rountree & Samantha Henderson

Perhaps you've heard of dust devils? Meet their considerably nastier relatives.

42 The Economy of Powerful Emotion
by Sharon Mock

In the right light tears might look like glittering diamonds, but, really, isn't it a good thing that they're not?

56 The Good Husband
by Thea Hutcheson

The cycle of life never changes. Or rather it does, but it's supposed to.

64 The Equation
by Patrick Samphire

Most people strive to be rational and logical. Perhaps more people should do otherwise.

68 Wreathed in Wisteria, Draped in Ivy
by Euan Harvey

Loyalty is not often rewarded appropriately. Treachery often is.

78 The Tides of the Heart
by David D. Levine

Older houses might be charming but they can be a nuisance to maintain. Sometimes the charm is actually part of the problem.

100th Issue Special Features

5 Editorial
by Shawna McCarthy

We Made it!

6 Letters

Letters from some very special fans

93 Gaming Reviews
by Matt London & Matt Staggs

Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds
Dragon Age II Wrath of Ashardalon
Kingmaker
Bookhounds of London
Soldiers of Fortune

On our website at
http://www.rofmag.com

Realms of Fantasy Forum

Blog

Little Known Facts About Realms of Fantasy

1 We'll be publishing our 600th story in the October 2011 issue.

2 Our most published author is Richard Parks, with twenty-five stories (and a twenty-sixth on the way!).

3 Our most published illustrator is Web Bryant, with twenty-two illustrations.

4 The artist with the most cover illustrations for us is Luis Royo, with twelve.

5 The only person who has been with the magazine since its inception is our Fiction (and founding) Editor, Shawna McCarthy.

6 Our oldest columnist is Karen Haber, who has been contributing to the Artists Gallery since the June 1998 issue.

7 The current editorial team was ten years in the making. In 2000, Douglas Cohen and Theodora Goss were both new to speculative fiction and attended the Odyssey Fantasy & Science Fiction Writing Workshop, where they met as classmates. In 2001, Theodora attended the Clarion Writers Workshop as well, where Shawna McCarthy was one of the teachers that year. Shawna ended up taking one of Theodora's Clarion stories for *Realms of Fantasy*, which marked Theodora's first publication. Theodora would go on to publish a number of other stories in *Realms of Fantasy*, as well as a Folkroots article. Meanwhile, Shawna hired Douglas in 2005 to be the magazine's assistant editor. Under her tutelage, Douglas would eventually become the magazine's editor. Come 2010, when *Realms of Fantasy* needed a new Folkroots Editor, Douglas reached out to his old classmate and recruited Theodora to the magazine.

8 Stories from *RoF* have been nominated for eight Nebulas (results on two pending) and won one: Jane Yolen's "Lost Girls." We've won one Bram Stoker ("Aftershock" by F. Paul Wilson) and one World Fantasy Award ("The Grammarian's Five Daughters" by Eleanor Arnason). Stories from *RoF* have never been nominated for the Hugo, nor has the editor. HINT HINT.

9 We have had five publishers (Mark Hintz and Carl Gnam, Warren Lapine, Kim and William Gilchrist) but only three assistant editors/ editorial assistants (Rebecca McCabe, Carina Gonzalez, and Douglas Cohen).

10 Despite constant assertions from rejected writers saying that we only publish Big Names, about 15% of our stories have come from the slush over the 100 issues of our existence.

11 (An extra fact for good luck.) *Realms of Fantasy* has subscribers all over the world. America, Canada, Finland, Japan, the United Kingdom, Australia, Bulgaria, France, Switzerland, Denmark, and Brazil...just to name a few.

Contributors

Artists:
Thomas Canty
Laurie Harden
Lori Koefoed
Dave Leri
Gary Lippincott
Petar Meseldžija
David Palumbo
Tony Shasteen

Cover art by Thomas Canty

Poetry:
Ursula K. Le Guin

Fiction Authors:
Leah Bobet
Euan Harvey
Samantha Henderson
Thea Hutcheson
David D. Levine
Sharon Mock
Josh Rountree
Patrick Samphire

Did you notice this little box on the back cover? It's called a QR code. You can scan it with your smartphone via a mobile phone application. What it does is then take you to our website where you can find additional content, news and more. In future issues it will be located on the bottom of the front cover.

REALMS OF FANTASY (ISSN 1078-1951) is published by Damnation Books LLC. P.O. Box 1208 Santa Rosa, CA 95402. Periodical Rate Postage is paid in Santa Rosa, CA, and additional mailing offices. REALMS OF FANTASY Volume 17 Number 3 ©2011 by Damnation Books LLC, all rights reserved.

Copyrights to stories and illustrations are the property of their creators. The content of this publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without the consent of the copyright holder.

Subscription Services and information email to subscriptions@rofmag.com or write REALMS OF FANTASY, P.O. Box 1208, Santa Rosa, CA 95402. Single copies $7.00, plus $1.50 for postage to REALMS OF FANTASY. Yearly subscriptions in the United States: $19.99; Canada and overseas: $29.99. Email PDF yearly subscriptions: $14.99. Send editorial mail and submission guideline requests to P.O. Box 527, Rumson, NJ 07760. Customer Service number: (707) 595-4738 Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. PST.

REALMS OF FANTASY accepts editorial submissions, but we assume no responsibility for the loss or damage of unsolicited materials. Submissions should include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to REALMS OF FANTASY P.O. Box 1208, Santa Rosa, CA 95402.

REALMS OF FANTASY

Volume 17 Number 3
June 2011
Issue # 100

PUBLISHERS
William Gilchrist
Kim Richards Gilchrist

FICTION EDITOR
Shawna McCarthy

EDITOR
Douglas Cohen

COPY EDITORS
Marty Halpern
Ian Randal Strock

FOLKROOTS EDITOR
Theodora Goss

ADVERTISING
Kim Richards Gilchrist
(707) 595-4738
kim@damnationbooks.com

WORLD WIDE DISTRIBUTION
Curtis Circulation Co.

EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE
P.O. Box 527
Rumson, NJ 07760

CUSTOMER SERVICE
(707) 595-4738
Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. PST.

Special Editorial

by Shawna McCarthy

We're blowing out a hundred candles on our cake! Or we would be if we had a cake big enough, and enough candles, and enough of those little candle holders that keep the wax from dripping onto the cake. And an office we all worked in together, along with someone with the lungpower to blow out a hundred candles. But just imagine us doing it anyway, because in our minds we are.

From the day *Realms of Fantasy* was announced, people have been predicting its demise. They were right; twice, in fact. But what no one counted on was this community's deep love of the printed word and of short fiction. Many years ago, when I was still at *Asimov's,* no less an authority than the *New York Times Book Review* ran an article on the death of short fiction, saying that there were no longer any magazines that published it. Given that I worked at just such a magazine, as did the editors of *Alfred Hitchcock's* and *Ellery Queen*, and *Analog*, I and the other editors took umbrage and wrote a letter to the editor of the Book Review outlining how between us we published many hundreds of thousands of words of short fiction each year, launching the careers of many illustrious authors. Just because we weren't "literary" magazines didn't mean that we weren't valuable and viable markets. To my surprise, the letter was printed, and, to no surprise, exactly nothing happened. But we made our point and the point is still valid today. Short fiction is not dead!

But in order to keep it alive, we need to keep it vigorous, and vigor does not come from standing still. Now with our third publisher, the wonderful Kim Richards-Gilchrist and William Gilchrist of Damnation Books, we're going to make some changes to keep Realms vital for another 100 issues. First off, we're going to make the move to electronic submissions. Not just yet, mind you, so don't start sending files until we announce it on the website and on our Facebook page. But it will be soon, we promise! Second, we're adding poetry to the mix, starting with this issue. And we're not starting small, either: Ursula K. Le Guin is our Founding Poet. (Again, put down those mice. Please hold off on submitting poetry till you've read our editorial requirements. Kthnx.)

And because we've reached the ripe old age of 100, we're adding some bonus value to this issue. You might notice, for instance, that this issue is larger than usual—it's 100 pages! That means a third more fiction and art in this issue. There's also a one-time reappearance of the letters page, with some very nice letters from some very nice people, and of course the occasional and infrequent editorial from yours truly. We'd also like to ask your opinion on some things. What would you like to see more of? (Don't say sword-and-sorcery—we would publish more of it we received better submissions in this vein, believe us!) What less? Would you like letters to become a regular feature again? We let it drop because as a bimonthly magazine it's hard to keep letters current and interesting, and no one wants to waste a page on What A Great Mag I Read It All The Time. Please visit the blog on our website (www.rofmag.com) or our Facebook page to share your opinions. We'd love to hear from you.

One last thing before we go party—I've said it before and I'll say it again. Thank you, all of you. Readers, writers, fans, friends, and even foes (I hope we don't have any of those, but who knows...), you are who make it all possible and even more than that, worthwhile. Thanks for your steadfast support and your great love of fiction. We quite literally couldn't do it without you.

Letters

One Hundred Issues. Wow.

Sherman, set the Wayback Machine for March 7, 1994. I'd sold my third story and was just getting used to the idea of being a "pro" when news broke of a new magazine, with Shawna McCarthy, former editor of *Asimov's SF*, in charge. A magazine dedicated to fantasy. There was a huge buzz online surrounding the announcement and we all Wanted In. Shawna bought the first story I sent her. That was "The Last Waltz" and it appeared in the third issue, February 1995. It was also the first time my name appeared on the front of any magazine, and that issue with its marvelous Bob Eggleton cover is framed and hanging in a place of honor in my library. Now at 100 issues for *Realms of Fantasy* with twenty-six of my stories included, past and future, we're both still going. Not without a scare or two. I know how close we came to losing *Realms* but I also know how lucky I and a lot of other writers and readers were that it ever existed in the first place. Shawna's given more of my work a good home than any other individual editor, and I'll always be grateful for that. More important, Shawna always was and is willing to give a new writer a chance, and I'm happier than I can say that this proud tradition is going to continue.

So why not go for Two Hundred? I'll be here if you will.

Ubiquitously,
Richard Parks

* * * *

Dear Realms of Fantasy,

I'm writing this letter on the day that my first novel is released to the public. That's particularly fitting, I think, because the book almost certainly wouldn't have come into being without the early encouragement I felt when Shawna took my first short story, "Kin to Crows," for publication over a dozen years ago now.

I know the magazine has experienced some tumultuous times over that period—heck, so have I—but I have always been incredibly impressed with how the stories (and other offerings) have stayed at such a high level, continuing to contribute to the genre we all love, issue in and issue out. The best testament I can give to *Realms of Fantasy*, and its invaluable fiction editor Shawna McCarthy, is to say that I've never picked up an issue that didn't offer a piece that transported me elsewhere. There aren't many magazines I can say that about.

Sincerely,
Christopher Rowe

* * * *

On October 30th of 1999, I wrecked my car on the way to work. The accident was my fault; I'm still not sure why I didn't notice the oncoming car as I turned left. I wasn't hurt, but the car was left barely drivable and I was filled with the shaken, miserable self-recrimination that is probably familiar to anyone who's ever crashed a car.

My husband got home before I did that day, and I called to let him know I did not feel up to stopping by the grocery store to get something for dinner. "Oh, that's okay," he said cheerfully. "Let's go out. To, um, cheer you up."

"Okay," I said. "This has been an awful day."

"Yeah..." he said. "I really hope it gets better."

I got home to find the answering machine message he'd already listened to—from *Realms of Fantasy*, offering to buy my story, "Gift of the Winter King." It was my first professional sale and turned one of my worst days ever into one of the best.

Breaking into *Realms* helped me get the agent who sold my first novel. *Realms* went on to publish several more of my stories—one of which was reprinted in a "Year's Best" anthology. I will always be grateful to Shawna for helping me at the beginning of my career, and I'm delighted that the magazine has made it all the way to issue #100!

Naomi Kritzer

* * * *

Dear Shawna,

Congratulations on the 100th issue of *Realms of Fantasy*! I'm glad to see your magazine reach such an important mark for a ten-fingered species such as our own. (If we all had eleven fingers, we wouldn't be celebrating for another twenty-one issues.)

My own story, "The Burning Man," appeared back in February 2002. This was my first professional story sale, and I was quite proud to be in the pages of your magazine! It was such a high-quality production, with fabulous artwork for my story. I purchased a copy of the print by Kyle Anderson, and it still hangs on my wall to this day.

My joy at having such a fabulous first sale was dashed slightly by the fact that the last line of the story was not printed due to a production issue. I often joked

that if I'd known I was writing a serial, I would have written more for the second half! This quirky event gave me opportunity to have a little fun, and I posted to my web page the "Top Ten Last Lines to My Story."

Now, with two novels under my belt, and a third on the way, I can look back on those awkward beginnings with pride. I note that I've never received more email from readers for anything else I've written. Maybe I should leave the last line out of my next novel....

Best wishes,
Paul Melko

* * * *

I don't remember when I bought my first *Reams of Fantasy*. It was before I ever went to the Odyssey Writing Workshop, which was the beginning of my writing career. But I do remember what it represented to me. It was the magazine for fantasy, the one in which all the fantasy writers wanted to publish in. I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful to be in a magazine like *Realms of Fantasy* someday? I went to Odyssey, and the next year I went to the Clarion Writing Workshop. One of the incentives for going to Clarion that year was that Shawna McCarthy would be there. I wanted to learn from the editor of *the* fantasy magazine. While she was there, Shawna read a story of mine that was in the critique pile—and she bought it! That was so incredible, so unexpected. My first sale, and to *Realms of Fantasy!* It convinced me that there was a future for me in this field, that I could be the fantasy writer I wanted to be. That story was called "The Rose in Twelve Petals," and there have been many stories since then, some in *Realms of Fantasy*. It's a tremendous privilege, now, to be *Realms of Fantasy's Folkroots* editor, following in the footsteps of Terri Windling. And I'm so glad to see that after all this time, *Realms of Fantasy* is still going strong, still the beautiful magazine it was when I first bought it. Happy 100th issue, *Realms of Fantasy*! May I still be reading you when the 200th comes out....

Theodora Goss

* * * *

Some years ago, I was tooling around with an idea for a Christmas story, partly inspired by the otherworldly feeling of a friend's annual New Year's gathering. I'd already written a story with Evie Scelan as narrator, who tracked things by scent and had a cranky relationship with Boston's magical undercurrent, and telling this story from her perspective brought it all together.

However, by this point I'd amassed a nice stack of rejection letters from *Realms of Fantasy* (including both Yellow and Blue Forms of Pain and Death), and I was pretty sure that a holiday story would be even more of a long shot than my other newbie works. I'm still amazed and flattered that *Realms* accepted it, especially since "Christmas Apples" wasn't just my first professional sale, but my first sale at all.

Years later, I've sold three novels about Evie, as well as many more short stories—even a few to *Realms of Fantasy*—and I've started to think that in another ten years or so I might actually get the hang of this. And I'm pretty sure that it's all because *Realms* took a chance on a holiday story. So thanks again to Shawna and Carina and Doug for all their work. I'm really glad you guys are out there.

Margaret Ronald

* * * *

Dear Shawna and Doug,

Wow...100 issues! Congratulations. It couldn't have happened without your hands at the helm.

I'm particularly grateful to *Realms of Fantasy* because of its role in really launching my career. Doug, I'm so glad you pulled "Of Metal Men and Scarlet Thread and Dancing with the Sunrise" out of your slush pile back in 2005. And Shawna, you accepting that story and Allen Douglas creating the artwork brought about the earliest concept of what's now *The Psalms of Isaak*.

Later, when you passed on that second story in the sequence (back when I was convinced that the P of I was just a four-short-story cycle), you wrote a note on the rejection slip that told me to go and write a novel in that world with those characters. That note and the dare from Jay (Lake) and Jen led to me writing *Lamentation*. And *Lamentation* led to Tor picking up the entire series. The two of you—and *Realms of Fantasy*—have made a huge difference in my life personally and professionally. Thank you for that.

Realms of Fantasy has been a cradle to a lot of new writers over the years and I'm glad to be a part of that tribe. You two are great at what you do and I'm glad you're doing it. Congratulations on 100 issues!

Warmly,
Ken [Scholes]

* * * *

On New Year's Eve 2005, I was sitting on the floor of the kitchen crying over a rejection letter. This wasn't just any old rejection: this was a rejection for the Best Story I'd Ever Written. We know those stories when we write them—the world has this sort of magical glow. It was that kind of story, and somebody didn't like it. How was that possible? I was devastated.

My friend Luc sat me down after my birthday party two weeks later. He said that I shouldn't give up on the Best Story I'd Ever Written. He reminded me that Shawna McCarthy at *Realms of Fantasy* had handwritten a personal note on my last rejection letter. I should give her a try. Just one more try.

Six months after that I was crying again—this time on the phone to my parents while drinking pink champagne in celebration of my very first professional sale to *Realms of Fantasy*. In 2010, a much longer version of *Sunday* was accepted by Harcourt Books as my very first novel.

Thank you Shawna, for opening that door for me. Thank you for laying the first brick in the road to my first novel. Thank you for buying the Best Stories. Long Live *Realms of Fantasy*!

Alethea Kontis

* * * *

When I first began reading *Realms of Fantasy*, I was captivated. Fantasy has always been my genre of choice, whether as literature, artwork, movies, or video games. *Realms of Fantasy*, which combined all those elements, quickly became my magazine of choice. I soaked up every issue and discovered some of my favorite authors, like Richard Parks and M. K. Hobson. I bought my first subscription years ago and it continues to this day.

So it should come as no surprise that publishing a story in *Realms of Fantasy* became a personal goal of mine. When Doug pulled a story of mine from the slush and sent me a personal note complementing the story, I was in the clouds—nervously waiting in those clouds, but in them nonetheless. Some months later I received a message from Shawna that she wanted to publish "The Fortuitous Meeting of Gerard van Oost and Oludara." It was my first professional sale and, up to that point, the highlight of my writing career.

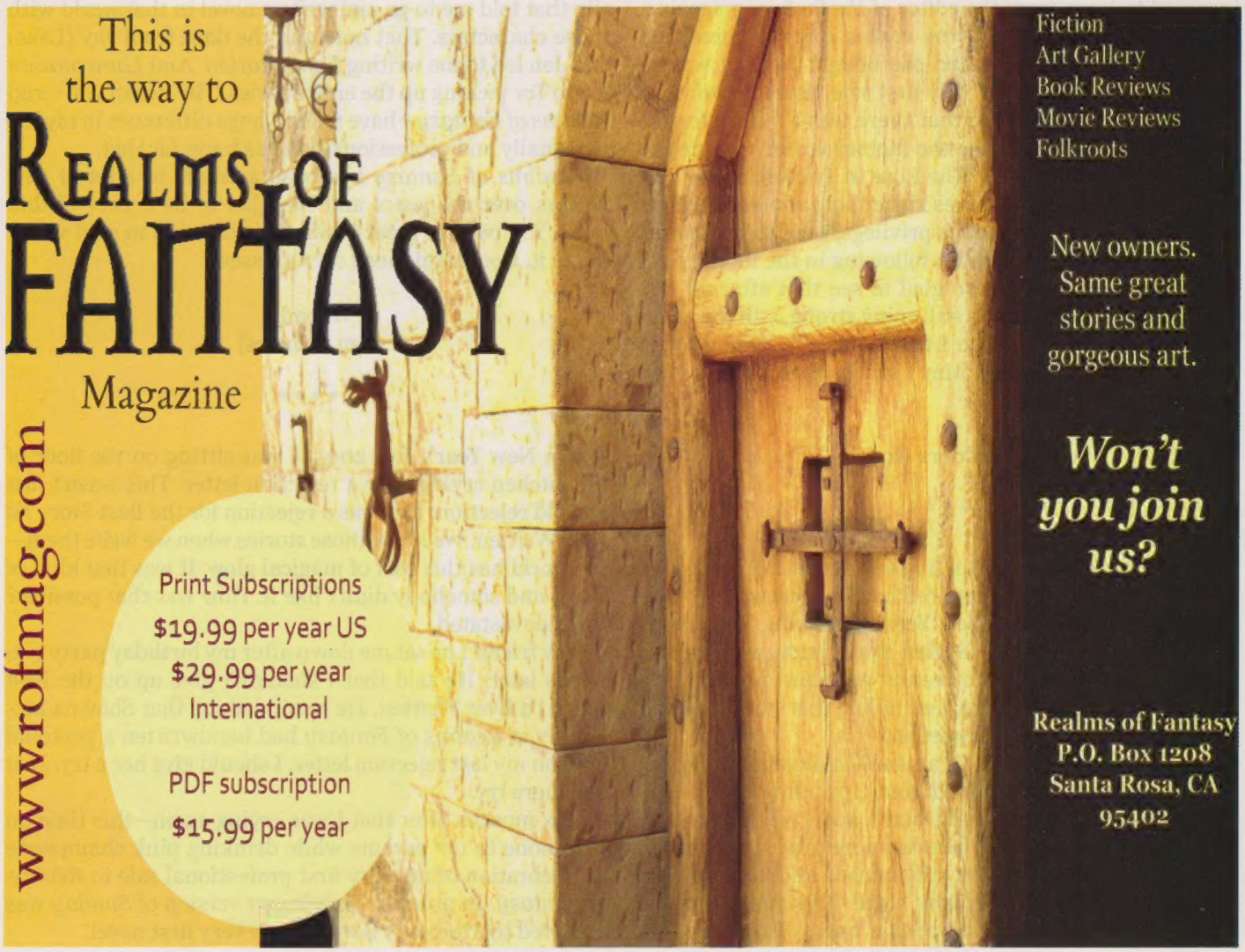
But in a twist so improbable it belongs in a fantasy magazine, that's not the end of the story. This year, that story became a Nebula finalist for Best Novelette, and the highlight of my writing career expanded by a power of ten.

So I owe a lot to Doug and Shawna, and I'm eternally grateful to you for choosing my submission from among so many other worthy stories. Thank you both for your wonderful magazine, and for making dreams come true!

Best,
Christopher Kastensmidt

* * * *

Why do I continue to be short fiction's devoted acolyte long after the ubiquitous They proclaimed it dead? This letter column explains it more clearly than I ever could. It brought tears to my eyes and joy to my heart. Thanks so much, everyone!!



Distance

By Ursula K. Le Guin

If we refuse the notion of away,
could we relearn the truth of far?
We deny distance, busy filling it
with what we throw out of the car,
paving the house of Shiva with our shit,
scumming Poseidon's silver hair with tar,
fouling the quail's nest. Away is where
we live, and here is where we are,
a long, long distance from the nearest star.

Mendenhall Glacier

By Ursula K. Le Guin

I never thought of a cold dragon
till I saw one dragging its slow body
down the wide wadi it had gouged
out of a mountain, saw the bluish spatter
of icy water from its mouth.
I'd felt the chill breath long before
I came close and saw it crawling there
half scaly, half bare, dirty grey, old.
That breath was cold, the hard breath
of a hard death, a slow, cold death.

Thor and His Mighty Hammer Stand Poised To Launch This Summer's Blockbuster Season

by Resa Nelson

If you've followed the remarkable career of Kenneth Branagh, you probably associate him with Shakespeare. Who could forget his poignant and powerful performance as Henry V in the movie (by the same name) that he also directed? Or he might have sent chills down your spine when he played the villainous Iago in *Othello*. In addition to the many films he's made based on Shakespeare's plays, like most of Britain's best actors he took a turn in the Harry Potter franchise by playing Gilderoy Lockhart, the hilariously self-admiring professor in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. The fact that Branagh is now directing the most recent superhero movie based on a Marvel comic book character warrants a double take. What could possibly interest an actor/director with such a wealth of experience and knowledge in helming a movie about the comic book hero Thor?

"I have a very clear understanding of the moment when I registered the comic: on a stand in a newspaper shop in Belfast, Northern Ireland, when I was eight or nine years old," Branagh says. "I remember I was coming back from church, would you believe? I remember the connection of the whole biblical world that I'd just come from, and it felt like maybe Sampson and Hercules were somehow whirring around in my head. And then I saw a picture on the front of a comic that looked just like them, but his name was Thor: a massive man made out of granite, it seemed. And it was just very eye-catching, that image of such titanic strength. Two and a half years ago, my agent rings up one day and says, 'Would you ever think of directing a film called *Thor*?' And I said, 'Of all the things you might have mentioned, that actually is a pretty interesting possibility. I'd certainly love to talk about it.'"

Marvel's comic book character is based on the god Thor from Norse mythology, a god of the common man with whom everyday people could identify. Part of the movie takes place in Asgard, the land of the gods, and characters include Odin (the father of the gods) and Loki, Thor's brother. While Thor is the strongest of the gods, he is also simple and direct in his dealings with others, unlike Odin and Loki, who are often conniving and self-serving in Norse mythology. It was this sort of clash of character and family dynamics that intrigued Branagh.

"There's always been something that felt organic about it," Branagh says about *Thor*. "People have said to me, 'Was it because it seems sort of Shakespearean?' About a big royal family. About kings and queens. About battles and all of those things that I have some experience in doing stories about. In the end, I suppose that becomes the kind of thing I find I enjoy making pictures about.

"I guess the Shakespeare element to some extent is apparent in that he often took tales that existed in other forms: the Greeks and the Romans, medieval tales that became Hamlet, or the Scottish saga that became Macbeth. And he always seemed to be drawn to these archetypes. He loved trouble in powerful families."

In this movie, Thor is the oldest son in a royal family that assumes responsibility for protecting the universe. To accomplish this task, they take on a policing role, which means they attack first if necessary. "Thor in many ways is a chip off the old block," Branagh says. "Odin, his father, a wild man in his youth, and still capable of wildness and dangerous escapades, neverthe-

Photo credit: Mark Fellman / Marvel Studios Thor (Chris Hemsworth) in THOR, from Paramount Pictures and Marvel Entertainment.

© 2011 MVLFFLLC. TM & © 2011 Marvel. All Rights Reserved.

less in our story has maybe arrived at a certain kind of position of relative wisdom, relative maturity. His relationship with Thor you might characterize as somehow telling him, 'Do as I say, don't do as I do.' Thor, however, wants to make his own mistakes. He is at the beginning of the story an unthinking and unreasonable individual who has qualities...he's charming. You'll end up cheering for him, I think. There's a genuinely heroic part to him, but he is dangerously undisciplined for a man who rules a world or is due to. That lack of thinking, that lack of responsibility, that kind of rough diamond, an arrogant, cocky young man—those qualities get him into trouble and it's trouble that is so catastrophic that it results in his banishment."

At first, Thor fails to learn from being banished from Asgard to Earth. Instead of gaining wisdom from his punishment, Thor finds himself going through a series of trials and humiliations. A key figure in Thor's new life on Earth is Jane Foster, a scientist played by Natalie Portman, who won the Oscar earlier this year for *Black Swan*. Jane is involved in a research project that has her looking out into the stars, never imagining she'll encounter a god, much less fall in love with one. Complicating matters is a staple in the Marvel universe: SHIELD is a secret government operation hot on Thor's trail.

Once Thor begins to learn and grow from his banishment to Earth, he discovers Loki has maneuvered into a position to take power, which threatens to put the safety and stability of Asgard at risk. "So the mistakes that he makes in the first act of our picture are ones that become very costly as the story goes on," Branagh says. "And that personal journey on the road is not to wisdom but to some kind of position where he can be a better version of himself. That is heart of the story, I think. It's wrapped up obviously in a lot of action and a lot of fun and a lot of other characters, but the backbone of our story is the identity of Thor, maybe coming of age. The character arc is beautifully embodied by our leading actor, Chris Hemsworth. And I think what he brings to the character and what we try to put on the page is a very headstrong youth who feels the pressure of his entitlement."

Branagh joined the project three years ago, a time when *Thor* had already been in development for five years with several directors having come and gone. Between the Marvel comics and the Norse myths, he had a wealth of material to draw from, and that in itself created a challenge. With so many possible stories about Thor already existing, how do you choose the best one for a movie? "There are so many different characters, so many different kinds of worlds that it would be possible to make many, many, many different versions of Thor," Branagh says. "I think finding the way in a 21st century that a Thor story could resonate with an audience, and feel as contemporary as I believe this picture can and wants to be and is, was the challenge. I felt very strongly when I joined that there should be a strong, contemporary Earth element. That it shouldn't take itself too seriously. It shouldn't be too self-important. It should enjoy its rich tradition in the myths of the Norse people and of the Vikings, but it should be very direct, very contemporary, and the language should be simple and clear. And that this different kind of troubled and charming era could show us a different kind of super hero."

Photo credit: Zade Rosenthal / Marvel Studios

Left to right: Thor (Chris Hemsworth) and Odin (Anthony Hopkins) in THOR, from Paramount Pictures and Marvel Entertainment.

© 2011 MVLFFLLC. TM & © 2011 Marvel. All Rights Reserved.

Part of achieving that goal meant finding the right actor to play Thor. While actor Chris Hemsworth had some experience under his belt, his best known role to date is probably George Kirk, the heroically self-sacrificing and short-lived father of James Kirk, in *Star Trek*. After a series of auditions, he landed the role that has the potential to make him a star. "The path of auditioning to get a part is madness," Hemsworth says. "There's no real recipe for success."

Branagh talks about his experience working with Hemsworth. "I enjoyed it hugely for a few reasons. One is he was incredibly enthusiastic, passionate, and committed. So I had in front of me a young man who was a very hard worker. I had in front of me a young man who was a very fast learner. And I had someone who wanted to learn. So you have all those things in place and it becomes a privilege to be involved in trying to help out. And that's what you're trying to do. You're trying not to teach or impose; you're trying to reveal his interpretation of the character. You're trying to find what emerges as his Thor."

Hemsworth hit the gym and stuck to a regimented diet to gain the physique he needed to portray a god revered for his strength. He describes his diet as including a lot of chicken breast,

rice, and steak. "It went beyond the call of duty and was consistent and never got in the way," Branagh says. "Then on top of that, he was determined that Thor should be as richly layered a character as possible, so he joined in a rehearsal process. And he had good interplay with people like Anthony Hopkins [who plays Odin]. To play a scene with truly a great actor like that with an extraordinary track record and experience, you need courage. You can't be intimidated. You can't be acted off the screen. You've got to be up there, you have to be holding your own. It's a movie star performance by a terrific actor."

Hemsworth talks about Thor's journey in the film. "His biggest obstacle, I think, is probably himself at times. He has this great strength. The world is at his fingertips. He's the possible new king, but he's got to learn how to manage that power with some responsibility. His father is quite disappointed with him at one point. [Thor is] constantly asking questions in the search for who he is and his place in the world. That was a really interesting thing to track and keep looking at. His sense of justice and injustice. He's certainly very passionate. He's fiery at times, and when pointed in the right direction it's great but if not it can be pretty chaotic."

When asked if he identifies with Thor, Hemsworth laughs. "In some ways, yeah. I appreciate his passion and his motivation for things. You certainly got to have that as an actor. More often, you're being told 'no' than 'yes.' You have to be persistent. He certainly has that. I'd like to think his cockiness and arrogance is not one of my [traits]. I'd like to think I'm a little more humble."

Although Branagh first set eyes on a Thor comic book in childhood, Hemsworth wasn't familiar with the series before landing the role to play the superhero but soon started reading. "I had a whole stack of comic books. It was my introduction to the character. I could get a feel for who this guy is and his approach to things. I also read a bunch of books on Norse mythology and the Vikings."

One of the greatest challenges for both director and actor was the grand scale of the movie. "It's finding a balance," Hemsworth says. "My job is just appreciating the scope of it and how big it was. But also blocking that out and simplifying it. I was constantly walking that tightrope. On one hand, you could say, 'We're playing gods in this big, huge movie.' But then you have to say, 'It's between a father and a son, and that's what I'll worry about right now.' That was a constant challenge."

"The logistics of the film are enormous," Branagh adds. "I think it's easy on projects of this scale to lose sight of things. There are so many departments, so many logistical requirements, that hanging onto story, hanging onto that vision, keeping a steady march forward in the way you keep the tone consistent and evolving and organic and integrated with the approach that you decided on, I think that's the biggest challenge. You can get really caught up in the details if you get sidetracked, and sometimes you need to do that but mostly you've got to have that big picture view."

The first day of shooting involved a great deal of detail, but Branagh also describes it as his best day on set. "The first day was a striking one because we began with a battle. We began with monsters and all our principals. We had every new costume; we had a half-built set. We had some green screen. We had huge camera cranes. We had visual effects, we had prosthetics. We had many, many, many people in front of the camera and a vast army of people on the other side of the camera and probably five camera crews. And I remember thinking it was a particularly satisfying day because it was a first day of school. It was a little nervous making. At the end of the day, I suppose I went home very, very tired but thinking, 'Well, it's not going to get any bigger than that, and we even managed to have some fun. As long as you're prepared and you're prepared to change things as well, enjoy the fact of being at the head of this vast army of people trying to tell a story on a large scale.'"

Branagh's advice to himself turned out to be prophetic. Unlike many other high-budget superhero movies, he chose to rely more on sets and location than green screen. "We were in New Mexico on location one day," Branagh says. "In the morning, I wanted to do the scene in sunshine. It snowed. I got ready to make a change and do a scene in the snow, and it started to rain. I got ready to do a scene in the rain, the rain stopped and there were torrential winds. I was trying to get a scene done with Natalie Portman and Chris Hemsworth where they had very little clothes on and standing on a roof. Not only were they freezing but they couldn't stand up [because of the strong winds]. But the end of the day I needed to get a shot in the sunset, and it was cloudy and I couldn't see the sun. So that was a day where I thought God seemed to just be deciding to tease me a bit, but it was also a funny day where we were aware of our insignificance in the grand scheme of things. But it teaches you patience. It makes you wonder and marvel at the extraordinary nature of the New Mexican climate. Four seasons in a day doesn't even begin to cover it. It teaches you to have a sense of humor about the craziness of making films."

About the choice to build sets instead of using green screen, Branagh says, "We certainly

wanted to build environments where we could, because we were already in a story universe that could feel perhaps overwhelmingly synthetic. And we wanted to give a heft and a ballast from the feel of Thor's hammer to the material of Odin's throne to the mountains and the desert of New Mexico that just had a reality in this world that could seem too far-fetchedly fantastical but yet we wanted to take people on the trip but we wanted to really convince them that all these places existed. They were tangible, they had textures, etc."

Hemsworth adds, "The film is a combination of the Viking/science fiction world and then earthbound at times, as well. That's what makes it so unique, I think."

When talking about his experience of making *Thor*, Hemsworth sounds as giddy as a boy in a candy store. The film shot for about five months, and Hemsworth was on set nearly every day. "Kenneth Branagh, Anthony Hopkins, Natalie Portman. It was an incredible cast. These are people I've loved and been inspired by and watched for years, so just to be around them and work with them and watch them work was incredible."

Hemsworth describes one of his favorite experiences on set. "We'd been doing a scene one particular way, and then Ken came up and whispered something in [Hopkins's] ear. All of a sudden he turned on a dime and had this incredibly different performance, which was heart breaking and passionate. This stuff is mind-blowing to see on screen, but to be there on set and witness that was awesome."

About the film, Hemsworth says, "There's been such positive feedback around it and such excitement. And the bits I've seen just look awesome. It's visually incredibly stunning."

Branagh says, "I like the fact that it's fun. I like the fact that in the little friends and family screenings we've had internally, that word has come up regularly with surprise from people who might have expected to be overwhelmed by a darker epic. We still are happy that it's dramatic and it's action-packed, but they're laughing, they're having fun. They're surprised by it. I'm enjoying the fact that people are surprised that all of these different worlds seem to exist in the same film. They're surprised that it seems to hold together, and it does. And they seem to be delighted. I take some special pride in the feeling that the acting performances are very strong, and I'm very happy and proud about that."

Between Hemsworth's work ethic and attitude, he could be standing on the brink of becoming one of the hottest young actors in Hollywood. In May, the shooting begins for *The Avengers*, another Marvel-based movie in which Hemsworth will reprise his role of Thor in a story that unites his character with Iron Man, the Hulk, and Captain America. "It was great," he says about making *Thor*. "You run on adrenaline. It was long days, but everyone wanted to be there so you kept pushing through." Hemsworth pauses and laughs. "I enjoy working, especially a job like that, more than I do not working and sitting at home."

Photo credit: Zade Rosenthal / Marvel Studios
Thor (Chris Hemsworth) in THOR,
from Paramount Pictures and Marvel Entertainment.
© 2011 MVLFFLLC. TM & © 2011 Marvel. All Rights Reserved.

Blockbuster Season Begins

As blockbuster season begins, expect to see a good crop of fantasy and horror offerings. Leading the pack is the fourth installment in Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* series, *On Stranger Tides*, set to open in theaters on May 20. When the first movie (*The Curse of the Black Pearl*) came out in 2003, expectations were low. But Johnny Depp's unique take on Captain Jack Sparrow, lots of swashbuckling action, and breathtaking visual effects won audiences worldwide and left them begging for more. In the first film, Captain Sparrow and Will Turner rescue his sweetheart Elizabeth from the cursed Captain Barbossa and his crew. In *Dead Man's Chest* (2006), Will and Elizabeth help Sparrow when he must repay a debt to Davy Jones. *At World's End* (2007) resolves the love story of Will and Elizabeth. Therefore, *On Stranger Tides* ushers in several new characters and launches Sparrow on a new path. While searching for the Fountain of Youth, he encounters a woman from his past (Penélope Cruz of *Nine*, *Gothika*), who he finds attractive but as terrifying as Blackbeard (Ian McShane of TV's *Deadwood*). As Sparrow looks for the Fountain of Youth, he must first find a map; his quest pits him against cutthroats, mermaids, and zombies.

Another sequel, *Kung Fu Panda 2* (Paramount/Dreamworks), opens on May 26. In the first movie, slacker panda Po (voiced by Jack Black of *The School of Rock*) stumbled into his lifelong dream of studying martial arts with his idols, and faced off against a villainous snow leopard. Now a new villain holds a weapon that threatens to destroy Kung Fu itself. Although Lord Shen is an albino peacock who was so sick and weak in his youth that his own parents gave up on him, he now has a lust for power and the desire to make everyone notice him. To defeat Lord Shen, Po must turn to his own past and discover the secrets of his origins.

Opening on May 27, *The Tree of Life* (Fox Searchlight Pictures) promises to be a visually stunning movie that borders on fantasy. Directed by Terrence Malick (*The New World*, *The Thin Red Line*), the movie focuses on the adult Jack (played by Sean Penn of *Milk*, *Mystic River*) and his childhood. Jack's mother is an altruist, but his father (played by Brad Pitt of *Megamind*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*) instills the importance of self-preservation in his sons, stating, "It takes fierce will to get ahead in this world." Jack is torn between his parents' perceptions of the world. When tragedy strikes, he becomes lost until he learns how to reconcile those differences.

The *X-Men* series continues with the release of a prequel called *X-Men: First Class* (20th Century Fox) on June 3. This franchise includes three films about the mutant superheroes, as well as an origin movie about one of its most popular characters, Wolverine. But this movie precedes them all by going back to the early 1960s when Kennedy was president and comic book characters and arch enemies Professor X and Magneto were college students known as Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr. They meet at Oxford University and form a friendship that stands fast. Each is discovering his own powers, and

they work together with other mutants to save the world. However, events drive them apart, revealing their different views of the roles of humans and mutants. *X-Men: First Class* tells the story of how Charles Xavier became Professor X of the X-Men and how Erik Lehnsherr became Magneto of the Brotherhood of Mutants.

Fans of J. J. Abrams (*Cloverfield*, TV's *Lost* and *Alias*) should look for his newest movie, *Super 8*, to be released by Paramount on June 10. Abrams typically keeps tight wraps on his projects, but *Super 8* looks like another monster movie. Set in 1979, the U.S. Air Force closes a section of Area 51 and sends all materials by train to a secure facility in Ohio. However, a truck crosses the tracks and causes a devastating accident that sends train cars onto their sides. Something dangerous inside one of those cars escapes and makes its way to a small town where a young boy uses his Super 8 camera to capture footage that the government wants no one to see.

One of the year's most highly anticipated movies is yet another film based on a DC Comics superhero: *Green Lantern* (from Warner Bros. Pictures) is due in theaters on June 17. Ryan Reynolds (*Wolverine*, *The Proposal*) stars as Hal Jordan, a cocky test pilot who stumbles upon an alien that crash lands on Earth. The alien gives a green ring to Hal, claiming the ring chose him and that he must join an elite intergalactic police force called the Green Lantern Corps. This police force is made up of aliens from planets throughout the universe, but they have little regard for humans. As the first human to join the Green Lantern Corps, Hal must learn how to master the great power he now possesses, thanks to the ring. But he must also learn how to overcome his own fears in time to help the Corps protect Earth from a dangerous villain.

On June 24 look for the latest Pixar/Disney animated film, *Cars 2*, a sequel to the 2006 hit. In *Cars*, we met Lightning McQueen (voiced by Owen Wilson of the *Night at the Museum* series), a race car that unexpectedly got sidelined in Radiator Springs, where he learned the meaning of friendship. *Cars 2* is described as a comedic spy thriller in which McQueen competes in a World Grand Prix that holds races in London, Tokyo, and Italy. At the same time, his friend Mater the tow truck (voiced by comedian Larry the Cable Guy) is mistaken for an American secret agent and finds himself in the middle of an international spy game.

Fairies and Fairylands

by Theodora Goss

Fairies are the only fantasy creatures with their own magazine.

On a cold day in Colorado, after visiting the Botanical Gardens, I walked into the Tattered Cover Book Store. It was early spring, and the Botanical Gardens had been bare, just a few green shoots showing through the frost. In the bookstore, on the magazine racks, I saw a copy of *Faerie Magazine*. I flipped through it, and suddenly I was in Fairyland, where it is always summer and nothing ever dies, perhaps because it is already the land of the dead. What other fantasy creatures get their own magazines? There are no magazines for aficionados of trolls, selkies, or giants, although I imagine all of those creatures have their fans. But fairies have always had a particular hold on our imagination. If you flip open a copy of *Faerie Magazine*, you'll see fairy lore, fairy recipes, entire fairy festivals, where ordinary people, accountants and teachers and owners of cupcake shops, all dress up as fairies, perhaps not realizing how dangerous it can be to imitate the Good People or People of Peace. Because fairies are dangerous, as we shall see. They are also, of course, alluring. Perhaps the secret of that allure is that they are the essence of fantasy, offering us the opportunity to visit Fairyland. (No other fantasy creatures get their own country either.) Like the best fantasy, they lure us away into another world, where magic is real and we can see marvels. White deer that flash through the forest. Apple trees that fruit and blossom at once. The Fairy Queen herself.

The Lovers' World by Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale

No wonder we dream of fairies, living in a mortal world where during parts of the year even the Botanical Gardens are covered with frost and all the magic of spring lies underground. We long for them as we long for magic itself, for the marvelous in our lives. But as I mentioned, they can also be dangerous. So what follows is a guide for those accountants and teachers and owners of cupcake shops, who represent us all. In case they encounter fairies, which is entirely likely.

I. What Are Fairies, Anyway?

That's a good question. And there's no one answer to it.

According to Katherine Briggs, who wrote both *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* and *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature,* two essential guides to the subject, the word *fairy* can be used in two ways: "The first is the narrow, exact use of the word to express one species of those supernatural creatures 'of a middle nature between man and angels'—as they were described in the seventeenth century—varying in size, in powers, in span of life and in moral attributes, but sharply differing from other species such as hob-goblins, monsters, hags, merpeople and so on." The second is a more general sense of the word to mean any magical creature that is not an angel, devil, or ghost.[1] The first sense of the word is the one we want here, because hob-goblins and hags, no matter how fascinating, are not our subject. We want to know about fairies specifically. And I will confine this particular article to the fairies of the British Isles. Fairies and fairy lore are found all over the world, but there is simply too much material to discuss it all here. So those of you traveling to France or Greece will need to do some additional research to make certain that your fairy encounters are as safe and productive as possible. However, there are certain common elements among fairies from different countries, so what follows will provide you with at least a basic guide.

Briggs tells us that the word *fairy* itself was not used in Britain before the medieval era. It comes from the French *fai*, which can be traced back to the Italian *fatae*, magical women who visit after the birth of a child to pronounce its future. Those magical women were originally the Roman Fata or fates, whom even the gods feared. The native British term was *elf*, from the Old English *aelf* and the Old German *alp*, a word that in modern German means "nightmare."

1 Katherine Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976). xi.

This was the term J. R. R. Tolkien preferred, and which he used in *The Hobbit*. Tolkien was reacting in part to the popular notion of fairies, going back to at least the Renaissance, as diminutive nature spirits. Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language*, first published in 1755, defines a fairy as a "Fabled being supposed to appear in a diminutive human form, and to dance in the meadows."[2] This definition does not describe the Fairy Queen who met True Thomas under the Eildon Tree, but it does represent a view of fairies that has persisted through Victorian fairy paintings and Disney movies. The idea that fairies are necessarily diminutive is reinforced by the popular Cicely Mary Barker series of Flower Fairies books. Tolkien, who mentions his own childhood disdain for "flower-fairies and fluttering sprites with antennae,"[3] believed that William Shakespeare and his contemporaries were responsible for the diminutive stature of fairies, but Briggs points out that in British folklore, fairies have always been a variety of sizes, large and small.

We find this variety in two descriptions of fairies, one by William Blake and one by Rudyard Kipling's Puck in *Puck of Pook's Hill*. Blake, who believed in fairies, is reported to have had the following conversation:

> "Did you ever see a fairy's funeral, madam?" said Blake to a lady who happened to be sitting next to him. "Never, Sir!" said the lady. "I have," said Blake, "but not before last night." And he went on to tell how, in his garden, he had seen "a procession of creatures of the size and colour of green and grey grasshoppers, bearing a body laid on a rose-leaf, which they buried with songs, and then disappeared."[4]

Blake's fairies are diminutive and insect-like, the sorts of fairies that Tolkien despised as a child. Puck describes the fairies he knows quite differently:

> Can you wonder that the People of the Hills don't care to be confused with that painty-winged, wand-waving, sugar-and-shake-your-head set of imposters? Butterfly wings indeed! I've seen Sir Huon and a troop of his people setting off from Tintagel Castle for Hy-Brasil in the teeth of a sou'westerly gale, with the spray flying all over the castle, and the Horses of the Hill wild with fright. Out they'd go in a lull, screaming like gulls, and back they'd be driven five good miles inland before they could come head to wind again. Butterfly-wings![5]

Claudia by Sophie Anderson

Puck's fairies are closer to the fairies of the medieval ballads, the sorts of fairies you'd expect to see on the Wild Hunt. But both sorts of fairies are part of the tradition.

There are two popular explanations for the origin of the fairies. According to the first of these, fairies had once been angels. When Lucifer was banished, the angels who had rebelled were banished with him. There were also angels who had not rebelled, but had not fought on God's side either. God said to them,

> There is something I must be telling you. I cannot keep you any longer in Heaven, because you are not with Me—and those that are not with Me are against Me. That is why I am not keeping you among my good angels any longer. But I am sending you down beyond the curtains of mist, to the world that is called the Earth, and there you are to live under the ground and in the hills as a Little People; and the people of the Earth will call you *the fairies*. I will not take away the wings from you, and when the moon is full you can come out from your fairy hills and exercise them, in case a time should come when I think you are fit to be recalled to Heaven and you would be needing your wings again.[6]

2 Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 1

3 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 36.

4 Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 162.

5 Ibid., 203.

6 Helen Drever, "The Origin of the Fairies," *A Fairy Tale Reader*, ed. John and Caitlin Matthews (New York: Aquarian/Thorsons, 1993), 21.

This story places the fairies within a Christian religious context, although it seems clear that the fairies predated Christianity in Britain. In "Thomas the Rhymer," the Fairy Queen shows True Thomas three roads. The first is a "narrow road, / So thick beset wi' thorns and briers," which goes to Heaven; the second is a "braid, braid road / That lies across that lily leven," which goes to Hell; and the third is a "bonny road / That winds about the fernie brae." The third road goes to Fairyland.[7] It is clear that Fairyland represents a third way, neither Heaven nor Hell, that lies outside orthodox Christianity. Perhaps that is why fairy morality is so different from our own. According to Briggs, although there are good and bad fairies in literature, particularly in the French fairy tales that have given us so many of our Disney movies, "in folklore a good fairy is a fairy in a good temper, and a bad fairy is one that has been offended."[8]

The other popular explanation is probably also the older one, predating Christianity: that fairies are the dead. Briggs tells the story of a young man who found himself among fairies because he had stayed out too late on Halloween night: "He met Finavarra the Fairy King and Oonagh his Queen; they gave him fairy gold and wine and were full of merriment, but for all that they were a company of the dead. When he looked steadily at any one of them he found him to be a neighbor who had died—perhaps many years before."[9] Perhaps that is why it is dangerous to eat fairy food. In the Cornish tale "The Fairy Dwelling on Selena Mor," a farmer found himself at a fairy feast and met his former sweetheart, who was thought to have died several years before. She tells him that she was required to stay in fairyland after eating a plum from the orchard, and warns him not to eat anything lest he have to stay there as well. But her caution does little good: "Like many other visitors of Fairyland," he "pined and lost all interest in life after this adventure."[10] This story is reminiscent of the myth of Persephone, who was forced to stay in Hades because she had eaten pomegranate seeds. The similarities suggest that Fairyland is also the land of the dead. As Briggs points out, "the distinction between the fairies and the dead is vague and shifting."[11]

Titania Sleeping by Richard Dadd

Perhaps the connection between fairies and the dead explains why fairies are usually found underground, under mountains, hills, or lakes. Throughout the British Isles, there are specific underground places associated with fairies. Lady Wilde gives a particularly evocative description of a lake dwelling:

> Down deep, under the waters of Lough Neagh, can still be seen, by those who have the gift of fairy vision, the columns and walls of the beautiful palaces once inhabited by the fairy race when they were the gods of the earth; and this tradition of a buried town beneath the waves has been prevalent for centuries amongst the people.[12]

There are also magical islands off the coast of Ireland and Wales that belong to the fairies. The island of Hy Brasil, a fairy island in Irish folklore, may have given its name to Brazil.[13] In those places, fairies keep their revels, to which humans are sometimes invited. But those who accept the invitation are often sorry they did so. Time passes differently in Fairyland, so a farmer who wanders into the hillside and dances with a fairy woman will sometimes wander out again, a hundred years after he had gone in, to find his friends long dead and himself forgotten. This was the fate of the Irish hero Ossian, who went to Fairyland to be with his fairy mistress. In *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*, W. Y. Evans-Wentz records that Ossian rode away with her on a white horse, across the ocean, presumably to one of those magical islands. When he had been with her for some time, he wished to return and see how his Fenian Brotherhood had fared. She warned him that Ireland had changed, and that he should not touch his foot to the ground. He rode the white horse back over the waves, only to find that hundreds of years had passed and the Fenians were dead. While riding through a countryside so altered he barely recognized it, he noticed men trying to move a stone under which some of their fellows had become trapped. He leaned down to help them, but the girth of the saddle broke and he fell upon the ground.

7 "Thomas the Rhymer," *Poems of the Fantastic and Macabre*, ed. Theodora Goss, accessed March 1, 2011, http://poemsofthefantastic.com/anonymous-ballads/.

8 Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 108.

9 Ibid., 15.

10 Ibid., 19.

11 Ibid., 51.

12 Ibid., 24.

13 J. R. R. Tolkien, 35.

In a moment, the white horse had fled, and Ossian had grown old.[14] The connection between fairies and particular places reveals what most likely went into the making of the fairies and the stories about them. They are most likely a combination of the pagan gods worshiped before the advent of Christianity; aboriginal peoples who were pushed to the margins, the mountains or hillsides, with each new conquest; and personifications of natural places and phenomena, which have been a part of human beliefs as far back as those beliefs have been recorded.

II. I Met a Fairy. Now What?

Well, you're in trouble, that's what.

Or you could be, if you're not careful. Most encounters with fairies are brief, and pass without incident as long as human observers do not interfere with the fairy folk. Folklorists have recorded a number of such encounters. R. L. Tongue, who traveled to Women's Institutes throughout Somerset to collect fairy and folk tales, collected the following tale from the president of the Women's Institute in the town of Wellington:

> When we were on holiday in Cornwall my daughter and I came down by a winding lane, and all of a sudden there was a small green man by a gate watching us. All in green, with a pointed hood and ears. We both saw him, and my little girl screamed—she's psychic—and we were cold with terror. We ran for the ferry below. It was going across, but it came all the way back to pick us up. No one said a word, but they didn't think we were silly. I don't think I've ever been so frightened.

This is a fairly typical account, involving just a glimpse of the fairy, and the president and her daughter were wise to run. As Briggs points out, "the fairy had seen them before they had seen it, and it was therefore dangerous."[15]

Not all encounters are so innocuous. Fairies are notorious for interfering with the human world, and particularly for abducting human beings. Human women are routinely abducted to care for fairy children, as midwives at their birthing or as nursemaids. However, the greatest danger is to human children, who may be stolen away and replaced by fairy children, called changelings. A human mother may wake up one morning to find that her child, once plump and smiling, is now old, wrinkled, and ugly. If she suspects that the child may be a changeling, she should do something so unusual that the changeling will have to remark on it. In *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*, W. B. Yeats records a changeling story in which the mother was advised to boil eggshells in a pot of water. When the changeling asked what she was doing, she replied that she was brewing eggshells. "'Oh!' shrieked the imp, starting up in the cradle and clapping his hands together. 'I'm fifteen hundred years in the world, and I never saw a brewery of eggshells!'" She ran toward the changeling, intending to throw it into the pot of boiling water, but when she got there, it was gone and her own baby lay in the cradle.[16] The brewery of eggshells is a traditional and relatively gentle means of testing a potential changeling. Other more violent means include throwing it on a fire or leaving it out in the snow. Stories of changelings sometimes had unfortunate and very real consequences. Children with congenital deformities, infantile paralysis, or mental illness were sometimes thought to be changelings, and were treated as such. According to Briggs, even at the beginning of the twentieth century "a child was burned to death in Ireland when the neighbors put him on a hot shovel."[17]

***Spirit of the Night* by John Atkinson Grimshaw**

Adults are abducted by fairies as well, but as we have seen, not all visits to Fairyland are involuntary. Lady Wilde records the case of a young man who "died suddenly on May-Eve while he was lying asleep under a hay-rick." His parents immediately knew that he had been carried off by the fairies, and they called a fairy doctor, who promised to bring him back in nine days.

14 W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (London: Oxford UP, 1911), 346-7.

15 Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 132.

16 W. B. Yeats, ed., *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993), 68.

17 Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 117.

Now on the ninth day a great crowd assembled to see the young man brought back from Fairyland. And in the midst stood the fairy doctor, performing his incantations by means of fire and a powder which he threw into the flames that caused a dense grey smoke to arise. Then taking off his hat, and holding a key in his hand, he called out three times in a loud voice, "Come forth, come forth, come forth!" On which a shrouded figure slowly rose up in the midst of the smoke, and a voice was heard answering, "Leave me in peace; I am happy with my fairy bride, and my parents need not weep for me, for I shall bring them good luck, and guard them from evil evermore."

Ferdinand Lured by Ariel by John Everett Millais

The parents were pleased that their son was content in Fairyland, so they gave the fairy doctor presents and sent him home.[18] Of course, a fairy could also leave Fairyland for a beloved mortal.

The Fairy's Lake by John Anster Fitzgerald

18 Ibid.. 126.

Evans-Wentz even records a fairy woman who followed the man she loved to America.[19]

As you might suspect from Lady Wilde's tale, the fairy doctor was an important figure, and the power he wielded, or claimed to wield, was subject to abuse. According to Terri Windling, "The most famous case of 'fairy doctoring' involved a grown woman in 1895, and riveted newspaper readers all across the British Isles. This was the murder of Bridget Cleary, a handsome young Irish woman who was killed by her husband, family, and neighbors because they thought she was a fairy changeling." When Bridget fell sick with what may have been pneumonia, her husband consulted a fairy doctor. The fairy doctor told him that the sick woman was a changeling, and that the real Bridget had been abducted by the fairies who lived in a nearby hill. Bridget was subjected to a variety of tests: tied to her bed, sprinkled with holy water, and eventually burned to death. Her husband, convinced that he had killed the changeling rather than Bridget, waited for her by the fairy hill, but the real Bridget never came out. He was eventually prosecuted for murder.[20]

Fraud involving the fairies has been a problem throughout their history. In 1613, John West and his accomplice Alice West were convicted at the Old Bailey for pretending to represent the king and queen of the fairies, asking for money in exchange for preferential access to their fairy majesties. They managed to defraud wealthy men and women of substantial sums, and even convinced a servant girl to sit naked in the garden on a cold winter's night with a pot of earth in her lap, believing the fairy queen would turn it into gold by morning, while they ran away with her savings and clothes. They were eventually whipped through London, made to stand in a pillory, and imprisoned in Newgate.[21] The Cottingley Fairy affair was quite a different matter. In 1917, two cousins, Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright, claimed to have photographed fairies in the forest near Elsie's house. Elsie's mother took the photographs to the theosophist Edward Gardner, who passed them on to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, inventor of Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle was considerably less skeptical than his detective would have been: he believed the photographs were genuine and wrote an article about them for *The Strand Magazine*. He also provided the girls with a camera and asked them to take more photographs if they could. They produced another three, for a total of five.

19 Ibid., 127.

20 Terri Winding, "Changelings," *The Journal of Mythic Arts* (Spring 2003), accessed March 1, 2011, http://www.endicott-studio.com/jMA0301/changelings.html.

21 J. O. Halliwell, *Illustrations of the Fairy Mythology of Shakespeare* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853), 181-6.

The girls maintained that the photographs were genuine for many years, but toward the end of their lives they admitted that they had simply photographed paper cutouts.[22] These fairy frauds suggest that ordinary human beings are as tricky as, if not trickier than, the fairies themselves.

How can you keep your encounters with fairies, *real* fairies, safe and productive? First, don't call them fairies: Good People or People of Peace are safer names to use. Second, don't destroy their dancing places or sacred trees. Respect their animals, which are usually white and red. When you speak to them, don't ask for their names or give them your own. Tell the truth, and don't try to bargain. Avoid dancing with them or participating in their revels, and never eat fairy food. If possible, carry iron, which can help you escape from a fairy hill. Watch out for the Wild Hunt, when fairy huntsmen race their horses across the sky, in full chase, their hounds baying. And if you meet the Fairy Queen, well. Just do as you're told, even if it means you have to serve her for seven years and tell the truth for the rest of your life.

The Fairy Festival by Gustav Dore

III. I Want To Write about Fairies

Good for you. You're going to be part of a long and varied literary tradition.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first mention of fairies in English literature occurs in *Beowulf*, where "eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas," "etins and elves and evil spirits," are described as the descendants of Cain. However, the fairies we know, living in Fairyland and ruled by their beautiful, dangerous queen, first appear in medieval ballads such as "Thomas the Rhymer." There is no better description, anywhere in English literature, of the Fairy Queen than in that ballad:

> True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank;
> A ferlie he spied wi' his e'e;
> And there he saw a ladye bright
> Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.
>
> Her skirt was o' the grass-green silk,
> Her mantle o' the velvet fyne;
> At ilka tett o' her horse's mane
> Hung fifty siller bells and nine.

Fairies were important to Shakespeare and his contemporaries in the Renaissance. According to Minor White Latham, "Literary England, as well as ordinary England, court and citizen, witnessed them in pageants and royal processes, saw them represented on the stage, played the role of the fairies in masques and in practical jokes, read of them in poems and pamphlets, and sang of their beauty and power, not forgetting to make use of a charm against their wickedness on going to bed."[23] In addition to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which introduced us to Titania and Oberon feuding over a changeling child, the Renaissance gave us Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, in which Queen Elizabeth I was represented as Gloriana, the Faerie Queene of the title, as well as Michael Drayton's *Nymphidia*, which Tolkien called "as a fairy story (a story about fairies), one of the worst ever written" because of the way in which it diminished his beloved elves.[24]

Fairies became important again in Romantic and Victorian poetry and prose. The knight of John Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" tells us, "I met a lady in the Meads, / Full beautiful, a faery's child," with long hair, light foot, and wild eyes. She takes the Knight to her "elfin grot" where, lulled to sleep, he dreams of all the knights in her thrall and realizes that he too has become her captive.[25] All of these literary works were adult fare. It was not until the Victorian era that fairies were considered appropriate for children. That era gives us some of the most important children's books about fairies, such as Jean Ingelow's *Mopsa the Fairy* and Andrew Lang's series of colored fairy books. George MacDonald's novel *Phantastes* also belongs to the Victorian era. It is an unusual novel, a fairy tale for adults in an era when fairies were being relegat-

22 Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*, 238-9.

23 Minor White Latham, 17.

24 J. R. R. Tolkien, 36.

25 John Keats, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," *English Romantic Poetry and Prose*, ed. Russell Noyes (New York: Oxford UP, 1956), 1190.

ed to the nursery, about a protagonist named Anodos (or "on no road") who goes on an allegorical journey through Fairyland. Fairies were reappropriated for adults in the modern era, when Yeats wrote about them as the gods of Ireland and Tolkien attempted to return the elves to their ancient glory. Drayton's Pigwiggen, who rides on an earwig, can scarcely be placed in the same category as Elrond, Lord of Rivendell, yet they both come from the same fairy tradition.

That tradition is broad and deep. It includes beautiful Fairy Queens, castles beneath Lough Neagh, the sorrows of Ossian, and the Cottingley Fairies cutouts. What form will it take next? That will be up to us. We are, after all, the fairies' chroniclers. Indeed, they may believe that we exist to visit their haunts, bake their recipes, and dress as we think they do, although they may laugh at our wings. And while we long for the magical and marvelous in our lives, the flash of the white deer in the forest, crocuses pushing through frost, we will read about them and continue telling their stories.

Selected Literature and Art:

Anonymous. "Tam Lin."
—. "Thomas the Rhymer."
Barrie, J. M. *Peter and Wendy*. 1911.
—. *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. 1906.
Carter, Angela. "The Erl-King." 1979.
Clarke, Susanna. *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. 2004.
—. *The Ladies of Grace Adieu and Other Stories*. 2006.
Crowley, John. *Little, Big*. 1981.
Dick, Philip K. "The King of the Elves." 1953.
Drayton, Michael. *Nymphidia*. 1627.
Dunsany, Lord (Edward Plunkett). *The King of Elfland's Daughter*. 1924.
—. "The Kith of the Elf-Folk." 1916.
Ingelow, Jean. *Mopsa the Fairy*. 1869.
Keats, John. "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." 1819.
Kipling, Rudyard. *Puck of Pook's Hill*. 1906.
MacDonald, George. *Phantastes*. 1858.
Mew, Charlotte. "The Changeling." 1916.
Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 1600.
—. *The Tempest*. 1623.
Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. 1590, 1596.
Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. 1937.
—. *The Lord of the Rings*. 1954-5.
Warner, Sylvia Townsend. *Kingdoms of Elfin*. 1977.
Yeats, W. B. "The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland." 1893.
—. "The Song of Wandering Aengus." 1899.
—."The Stolen Child." 1889.

Selected Scholarship:

Briggs, Katherine. *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.
—. *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967.
Latham, Minor White. *The Elizabethan Fairies*. New York: Octagon Books, 1972.
Matthews, John and Caitlin, eds. *A Fairy Tale Reader*. New York: Aquarian/Thorsons, 1993.
Tolkien, J. R. R. "On Fairy Stories." *The Tolkien Reader*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966.
Windling, Terri. "Changelings." *The Journal of Mythic Arts*. Spring 2003.
—. "Fairies in Legends, Lore, and Literature. *The Journal of Mythic Arts*. Spring 2006.
Yeats, W. B. *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1993.

Announcing the 2010 Readers Choice Award Winners

Best Artwork: Gallegos's cover illustration/interior illustration to "The Unknown God" by Ann Leckie (February 2010)

Best Fiction: We have a tie!
"The Fortuitous Meeting of Gerard van Oost and Oludara" by Christopher Kastensmidt (April 2010)

and

"Queen of the Kanguellas" by Scott Dalrymple (December 2010)

Congratulations to all our winners
and a big Thank You to everyone who voted!

The Ground Whereon She Stands

by Leah Bobet

Illustration by
Gary Lippincott

Florists tell us to
"Say it with flowers."
But sometimes you just
can't say it at all.

Alice sent me flowers. I didn't realize until mid-morning, when I walked through the hallway into the kitchen and greening stems twisted and crushed under bare feet. Then I looked back, and saw the petals shading the carpet, pulping on the grout. They didn't like tiles. I backtracked, and there were daisies rooted in the shower drain. They smelled like the second day of spring.

"Oh, Alice," I said to the flowers, and instead of grinning or crying put the coffee on the stove.

After the third cup, two cream, two sugar, I closed the laptop and went up the road to Idaho.

I lived in the last house with electricity before the Canadian border. Alice's house was past mine, up on a rise where the red oaks shrank to larch and bristly sumac. There was only one trail there, an old logging track wide enough for her asthmatic old red truck. She clipped the branches clean when they battered at the windows in the summertime.

It was close enough to walk, but not without hiking boots. By the time I reached the turnoff Russian sage nosed through the eyelets, fighting my shoelaces for sunlight.

Alice was in the back garden, coaxing a ripe heirloom tomato off its heavy stem. Idaho had three gardens: the back was the farm garden, stands of tomato plants and curling cucumber standing sentry between fat and heavy lettuces, patches of collard greens, toddler-fat corn, potatoes. There were four kinds of potatoes.

"Well, it's Idaho," she'd said diffidently last summer when I'd first had the tour. Her hands were in the pockets of her dirt-stained jeans, head down and looking just away. She'd been smiling.

She was humming now, a folksong in time with the pull and roll of vegetable flesh. I shifted my feet; I didn't want the sage rooting down in her beds. Its leaves rustled and rubbed against each other, and the noise brought her head up. She smiled again when she saw me, that crooked half-wince which was the closest she ever got.

"Hi," I said, and tripped over a fragrant stand of fresh-bloomed lavender flowers.

Her mouth opened, shaped a syllable. "Let's get you inside."

The light in the farmhouse was orchard-light, coming from the east. Alice shed her ballcap with one hand and settled me in a chair, a carved wooden one that might have come from the Heritage Festival down in Newfane. I picked my way through the brush toward the laces, snapping off green branches as they hardened into wood.

> "Someone put a spell on you."

The boots came off in tangles. I worked both feet free and wiggled my toes. They smelled sweet, and sharp, and green.

Alice came back in with scrubbed-clean hands, dirt still hiding under a fingernail. She took my right foot in her palms. "Russian sage," she said mildly. "Good for fevers."

Her hand was cool. The sweaty muscle in the peak of my arch relaxed against it. This close I could smell her shampoo, sharp with tea tree oil and vinegar. "It started growing this morning. There's daffodils in the shower."

I looked out the window instead of down at her, to spare myself the sight of it. It didn't matter. I caught the motion; the line of her mouth pressing together and her head turning down. "Someone put a spell on you," she said, perfectly even.

Because you're mine, my head filled in. Someone. Of course, Alice. I eased my foot away.

She looked up, no change in her face but the oh-so-white whites of her eyes. "Could take a few days," she muttered.

"Mmhmm," I replied. She knew full well I was rotating into town next week.

"Come take these down with me," she asked, barely a question. Eglantine spilled from between my toes onto her polished wood floor. The prickles tugged skin along with it. She winced watching, and I felt cruel.

"All right, I said. I crushed the opening petals when I stood.

* * * *

We sat side by side on the tailgate at the side of 147 with the sign out, and watched the tourists roar along the highway. *Local grown,* it announced. *Best veggies in Caledonia County!* I had painted it in bright blue and yellow at the end of last autumn. Alice coaxed taut and sweet early squash out of soil the farmers had left for dead, but she was clumsy with things like advertising. I swung my legs back and forth over the muddy shoulder and felt the traffic wind blow, golden dandelions fading and sporing from the creased soles of my feet.

There was no wireless signal here; it was barely a rest stop, just a collection of picnic tables and parking spots where the brush had been hacked away. I rested the laptop on my thighs, half-open against the summer sunshine glare.

Alice watched me from the edges of her eyes, in the way the old men called Indian. "Gonna need a few things."

I clicked the laptop shut.

"To take off the spell," she said. Cars pulled off the highway: sleek family sedans. A thick and sleepy blonde ducked out from a Honda's passenger seat and lit up a cigarette.

"Gonna find out who's enchanting me?" A trio of children tumbled from the Honda's backseat, the oldest dark-haired and pouting, her two little brothers pinching with sly and sloppy grins. I watched them, watched her Indian-style.

"Don't have 'em all in the garden. Have to look around."

The dandelions dropped to the pitted asphalt, their stems baking hot and sweet. Hissing marigolds and daisies sprung up in their place.

"So you're not going to find out." I shifted onto one thigh and turned to look her in the face. She had long, sharp lines in her cheeks, a straight nose. The kind of straightnesses you

wanted to touch, which would maybe send the message: give it up. I've known for months. "Have to start sleeping with a rowan cross."

Her hands clasped in her lap, long and strong and dirty. She swallowed, soft.

"Mama," the youngest boy's voice rose over the traffic. "Apricots."

I hadn't seen a flick of the fingers, a whisper of words, anything she could have charmed to turn the kid's head our way. Luck; I bit down on a sigh and swung my legs again. Just a damned coincidence.

"Saved by the bell," I muttered, and the surprise on her face held me over until the kids came barreling across the lot.

They took the apricots, and some new potatoes, red peppers, strawberries and mint besides. "Good for the stomach," Alice told the stringy-haired blonde, who up close looked too young for three school-age children.

"I get carsick," she winced, looking like she wished the dirt would swallow her. Wondering how Alice had smelled her sour stomach, no doubt, with her breath covered in the smell of cigarettes. Cringing at the touch of a stranger's attention on her for one flat minute.

I turned away.

The little girl was standing by the back tire of the truck, watching her shouting, bouncing brothers. "There's flowers on your feet," she informed me, mild. Her own feet were encased in plastic sandals.

"So there are," I replied.

"Are you magic?"

"No," I told her. "Just enchanted."

Alice plucked a daisy from my toes and tucked it behind the little girl's ear, her hands as careful as with her carrots.

When I got home the daffodils were blooming, and Alice had said not a word more. Butterflies nested along the kitchen counter, following the train and twist of flowering mint. I eased them off and into the air with the hem of my shirt. My mother taught me young about touching butterfly's wings: so delicate the valleys of your skin would strip their scales away.

They fluttered through the open windows into the growing evening, while I tapped and cropped away at the job manual for next summer's crop of state park guides. They tickled my toes, drifting to the floor, attracted by my sweat and the scent of roses. I walked like a sworn Jain monk across my sea-green kitchen tiles, placing every toe gently to avoid crushing living wings. Tiger lilies seeded in my wake, pushing uselessly at the solid floors.

I had brushed my teeth with Alice's homemade mint toothpaste and tucked into sheets scented with her lavender before I remembered my hiking boots, still at Idaho, abandoned for the tingle of her hands upon my skin.

* * * *

She woke me late morning from butterfly dreams, with the sun coming hard through the window. "Lisbet?" the leaves said, sawing one on the other like cricket legs. They smelled rich: sunlight on soft, hot veins, life churning and spreading into the summer skies. The smell of Alice's skin, I thought, and shivered.

Underfoot was satin; underfoot were petals, ankle-high, delicate. Like walking on butterfly wings.

"Oh gods, Lizzie—"

A branch snapped. I opened an eye.

There were flowers in my mattress, curling around the springs. Ivy had strangled my alarm clock sometime before 8:45 a.m., and all around me, opening, were roses, roses.

And above them Alice, hands twisting in each other like drowning worms.

"G'morning," I told her, and her hands stilled.

"I'll fix the door," she blurted, and reached out for the woody tangle around the nightstand. Ivy curled around her finger. She pulled her hand back.

"You broke in?" I mumbled, still half-asleep and pollen-drunk. There were no break-ins this far up, by the border. All of us were neighbours here. I still locked my door come nightfall.

"You didn't answer the door," she said breathily, windy enough that I opened my other eye. Her mouth was twisted, not a wince, but pained like I'd never seen before. "It looked like a bier," she said, and dropped into my wicker chair.

"Let—" I tugged with one leg "—let me make you some coffee."

The rose-roots caressed my calf and ankle and held on fast.

"Oh," I said, and my heart sped up to panicking.

"Shh," Alice said, one hand flat on my forehead, cool and a little damp and smelling sharp like tea tree. "Breathe for me, that's right, that's good—"

She parted the roses with her pocketknife, murmuring an apology for every pruned-out life. Blossoms drifted down the comforter to the floor, parting and bruising on the hand-knotted rug that covered wood that stayed cold even in summertime. "Stay still for me," she soothed. The knifeblade touched my outer thigh.

I breathed.

The shade peeled off my legs like a long morning, inching down to full noon. When I felt the sun on my ankles Alice said, "Okay, up," and thrust arms under my armpits, rolled and lifted, and I was standing on the battered old rug. Underfoot was satin; underfoot were petals, ankle-high, delicate. Like walking on butterfly wings.

I stared at my rose-grown bedsheets, split with thorns and staining deepest red. My chest stuttered again. "Coffee," I said, pressing a hand against my breastbone, and fled into the kitchen.

I leaned over the coffeepot and breathed it in, real, until the steam was too hot. Alice was in the doorway when I looked up. My old Christy Moore tour tee-shirt hung over her arm. She held it out with a face red as

roses, eyes fast on the floor where my trail of desperate bud blooms scrabbled, sent out roots, and died. I took it, and slipped it on over goose-pimpled skin.

"We go up into the woods today," she said when I was decent. My hiking boots were toes-to-the wall by the kitchen door.

"I have to have this manual done for when I rotate in—"

My right leg tickled. *Butterflies,* I thought, and looked down at a thin trail of blood. Thorn-scratched. The gouge looked like a cat's-claw, or a woman's. "Today," she said fixedly, and took my broom to the aborted flowers.

The daffodils were gone from the shower drain. In their place grew a cluster of impatiens, touch-me-not, a bright raspberry-puff of a bloom whose name I didn't know. I washed my hair thoroughly. The shampoo poisoned them on its way to the septic tank.

The bedroom was clean of roses when I tiptoed in to dress. The mattress was stripped, spring-marks and sweat stains laid open. I looked away from it and thought about shorts, underwear. A tee-shirt not the colour of roses.

"I couldn't find spare sheets," Alice said when I crept back into the kitchen. The dead buds had vanished, and there was toast on a plate in the centre of my table, a bowl of sectioned oranges. Shipped in from Florida: something that'd never see the inside of Alice's fridge. She hadn't touched them. Her hands were clean and scratched raw where they cradled the chipped old mug.

"I don't have any," I said, and poured myself some coffee. She'd laid out a teaspoon for me: two cream, two sugar. My hand had stopped shaking. That was good.

The corners of her mouth firmed. I watched her around my coffee. There'd be sheets on my doorstep by nightfall.

I laced up my hiking boots when the breakfast was gone. The leather was scratched where the sage had groped along sole and arch for live earth. "All right," I said to Alice, looked up at her seated at the table.

She looked away.

"We go up," she said.

I closed my broken-lock door behind us. We went up.

* * * *

There were honeybees in the woods above Idaho. They made the stepping treacherous as butterflies, gathered in my bootprints to roll in virgin pollen. "Wild swarm," Alice volunteered. The

"I'd save you."

sun was hot on my back. She shaded her eyes to watch me. Her face reflected ruddy sunlight; I couldn't see if she was smiling. "Jailbreak from an apiary down in the valley."

"What if I was allergic to beestings?" I put another foot down, narrowly missing a flash of yellow.

"I'd save you." Diffident. Not a speck of feeling.

Perhaps I was making up the whole thing.

There was no path this far onto the mountain. Instead I walked in Alice's footsteps, around prickly tree-branches and their slender young. Crushed leaves from last autumn's fall muffled her light tread, my heavy. The branches leaned in to touch my hair. Alice put a rough hand on bark, and they stilled.

"Don't mind 'em," she said, and led deeper on. Plucked a stem of grass here, a fingernail of bark there.

We stopped in front of a blossoming brush tree, all flat green leaves and straggling yellow flowers. The bees bobbed around it giddily, dancing buzzing maypole steps between the forking branches. "Here," she said. Tugged out a bucket, and handed it over. It was a kid's bucket, the kind they sell at beachside stalls with little plastic shovels attached. It was blue; the appliquéd white daisies were scratched halfway off. "Halfway full."

"What's this?" I ran my right hand along the branch. Stringy yellow flowers crumpled into my cupped left palm.

"Witch hazel," Alice said, and for the first time ever I saw her crooked-tooth grin.

She came back with wild raspberries; we ate them when the bucket was half-full, leaned against the deer-nibbled bark of a knotty old birch. The tickle between my toes was lazy strawberry vine, rambling curled across the busy earth. Alice reached down and plucked a ripening berry.

"It'll taste like feet," I warned.

She popped it in her mouth. It felt like being kissed. I breathed out, soft, and she heard it; I saw her sit up straighter, out of the corner of my eye.

I looked up at her.

She looked away.

We emerged from the woods with the sun falling, thick light moving slantwise through the muttering trees. "How long before it's fixed?" I asked.

"Soon," she murmured, a caress of the hair. And Idaho rose from the horizons, its gardens spread out before us like the breeding ground of stars.

The stove was cold in Idaho. The home was chilly, even with the rugs and woven tapestries, the seam-free joints of the floor, the double-leaded windows that blurred the view of the stars. Northern mountain summer: a breath of strawberry-wind across the cheeks, and then leaves falling before you knew it. I sat at the kitchen table and Alice stirred up the fire. The chimney was older than the rest of the house; it leaked. Alice's furniture smelled of loam and old maple smoke.

She made up two plates—apricots and sage cheddar, her own brown bread—and we ate quiet as the night crept in. When the moon came through the window Alice got up, padded barefoot to the door for her water pail, and went out to the pump. "Time to start," she said as she came back in. "Need the big pot."

Alice had deep cabinets. I opened them by firelight, one and then the next, feeling for the lip of a pot bigger than the others. When I brushed it my hand tingled. The room was warm; its lip was hot like hearthlight. I reached in and tugged it out, short unmuscular jerks. It was prickly black iron, weathered down on the rim.

"You have a witch pot," I said, half-smiling. She didn't reply.

I rested it on my belly and levered it up to the stove. The weight bore on

my stomach like I imagined children did from the other way in: steady and thick. Warm. The pot clanked when it cleared the edge of the stovetop.

In the bottom, snagged on the iron, was a single rose petal.

I put the pot down on the stove. I went back to the table. I sat.

Alice poured her bucket of water in and wicked the petal into the fire. It had dried out in the cupboard, in the bottom of the forever-warm pot. It burned fast. She stirred something into the water with a stained-smooth wooden spoon. It rang out seconds against the rim of the pot.

"Pass me the witch hazel?" she said. Didn't look up. I sat. Something rough pushed through a hole in my battered socks and snaked into the world. I didn't care to identify it.

"Lisbet?" she said, and turned her head.

"It was you." I leaned my head on my knuckles. I couldn't look at her. "I knew, okay?"

The wood-on-iron sound stopped. After the shifts of the woodstove, the house was as silent as winter.

"There's only one hedgewoman in the next three towns. People'd talk if there were more. They talk about you at the post office." I closed my hands tight so the nails pinched my palms. I was babbling. Stupid. Angry.

She put the spoon down. It clanked on the cloudy glass rest. "Yeah," she said soft.

"That's all you have to say?" I got to my feet, and pain pierced the skin of the arches. I was standing on briars. They had scored the soft polished wood of Alice's floor. "I *know*. I know you did this, and I got a good idea why, and that's all you have to say to me."

She gripped the edge of the counter.

I walked clock-steady over to her and turned her right around. "Usually you kiss a girl. Or you ask her up for dinner."

She let go of the counter easily. Boneless, like a toddler.

"Or you take her out to a movie. Or if you don't like movies you send her—" and my voice failed. I came down on my heels onto thorns. Flowers.

"So you know why." Her head was down. Her shoulders hunched. She muttered like a beaten child.

"Tell me why."

A pause. "Not gonna—" Her hair was too short to hide behind: a utilitarian woodsman's cut. The way her chin shrunk into her chest, it hadn't been once. It had been long and dusty blonde like beehives.

"Tell me."

"—if you know—"

The joints of my fingers were aching. *"Just say it."*

Alice opened her mouth. A cough.

A river of flowers poured onto the floor.

I yanked my hands back, swearing. Roses spilled over them between us, scraping breasts and belly, digging thorns into my sleeves. I shook, and they clung, dragged me back, rooted down into the rug. The blooms were thick, sick scarlet. The smell was a slick in the back of the mouth. "The hell—"

She opened her mouth. Closed it. And then bent over, heaving, and choked.

"Alice!"

A thorn curled under her front tooth. She twitched her lips a little. In the firelight, I couldn't tell if they were blue.

The thorns between us tore when I pushed through them: legs, arms, chest. One step and blood dribbled down between my breasts. Two, and it tingled at my knees. Her lips were blue. Up close I could see it. Her eyes were big and emptying out.

"Breathe for me."

"Breathe for me," I whispered, and heard the rattle of leaves in her throat.

I thrust my hands into the thorns and pulled.

They came out bloody. Hers, and mine. They came out rooting and squeezing: I threw them to the floor and the roots died blind. I pulled until I had the last of them and then checked her heartbeat, the colour of the delicate skin beneath her eyes. State Parks employees got mandatory first aid training—even the ones who just wrote and set the manuals.

Her heart was pounding. Her lips were dry and purpled. I couldn't feel breath.

"Breathe for me," I told her. No answer.

I laid a hand on her chest. Laid her back on the floor she'd joined herself, hardwood, stained with roses. My bloody hands stained her shirt.

Pinched her nose, touched her lips to mine. Began to breathe.

* * * *

I swept the petals into a clear compost bag when it was over. Red rose, and white rose, and rue.

* * * *

The roses scratched her throat. The rue was poison—not to be taken orally. Dr. James looked down Alice's throat with his pointed penlight and scraped down low in Alice's mouth with a tongue depressor, and put her on a liquid diet until the bloody scratches healed. "No rough food," he told her and me, her nearest neighbour. "No shouting. Nothing acidic. Lukewarm soup, not hot."

Alice pressed her mouth shut. Alice turned away.

The doctor packed his cracked black bag and I saw him to the door. "You'll make sure she takes it careful." A statement, not a question. A sprig of sharp goldenrod scratched at my right arch. I kept both feet planted.

"I'll come up afternoons. Maybe Mrs. Nguyen—"

"She won't otherwise," he interrupted, and looked down his blob of a nose at me. I looked away. My face felt warm. A lone white violet vined around my ankle and hid.

"I'll make sure," I said, small, and he nodded and let himself out.

I watched him drive down the trail from Idaho and then went back inside.

Alice leaned against the kitchen counter, solid butcher's-block wood she'd cured and fitted herself. Her hands were clasped in front of her mouth. I couldn't see her eyes.

"Doctor gave me these for you." Ibuprofen. Household medicine anywhere but Idaho, where Alice didn't let chemical things. "He said one every four hours, when it hurts." I set

the bottle down before her, clumsy. The doctor'd bandaged my hands up fat with gauze.

Alice swept the ibuprofen bottle into a drawer and took out ginger for tea.

"He said no hot liquids—" I protested. Not very well. My voice was sympathy-raw and too thin to be strong or firm.

"Goodnight," she whispered, hoarse. Rose-stricken.

* * * *

There was a hedge grew up around Idaho that night, lavender and rose-teeth and rue. I found it in the morning, with a Tupperware of white bean soup under one arm and pressed cough drops in a bag on the other, with the soles of my scratched-up boots sprouting bright pink eglantine and filling in Alice's reclaimed path. There'd been no sheets on my doorstep this morning. I'd slept wrapped in the winter storm blanket on the cool kitchen floor. I woke to a halo of mayfly weeds, withering into compost, laying down soil for an army of spiky green aloe.

I touched a finger to the twining growth, and it hissed at the thought of blood.

I went back down the mountain.

The second day there was a message on my phone from Mrs. Nguyen, down in town. Alice hadn't come for her baskets, she said, in her odd mix of late-learned English and the drawn-out local accent. Could her neigh-bah go up the mountain and look in?

The hedge had sprouted purple lobelia overnight. They weren't used to the thin air. They died, outside-in, as they opened. Their corpses blanketed the dirt.

"I don't do this," I told the hedge, soft. "I have a manual to finish in five days. I have a boss and a job."

The hedge spat withering blossoms.

My teeth clacked together; a muscle in my cheek started to hurt. "Nuh-uh," I said. "You want something of me, you *ask* it. I'm not gonna hurt you for it. I'm not...whoever that was," and bit my cheek at the thought. "But I won't be—" I rolled words around in my mouth, looked for the one whose taste matched foul "—herded."

My footprints filled with cactus on the way down the trail. I only looked back the once.

* * * *

Two days before I was to rotate in, Alice sent me a letter.

No stamp: she wouldn't have mailed it, not in our little town with its one post office and one whitewashed wood church. Both run by Mrs. Jeffrey Mays—that was how she styled herself, Missus Jeffrey—who would surely comment to the pastor on crazy old Alice sending handwritten letters to the Forestry woman up the highway. Hand*made* letters: the paper was textured and soft, speckled with flower petals and the twisting skeleton of a stem. I almost placed a toe on it to see if it would grow.

I touched a finger to the twining growth, and it hissed at the thought of blood.

Inside was a sachet: soft fabric and pungent, full of smells and sweet and strange that made my eyes water. "Green," I whispered to myself. It didn't smell like grass, or forests, or gardens. It smelled *green.*

This'll do it, the letter said, in Alice's angular hand. The perfect loops trembled. Not unpracticed; just seldom used. *Steep it into tea. I'm sorry.*

"Drink me," I murmured, and coughed a laugh. Cupped the sachet in my hands and imagined it staining them green, streaks the colour of sunlight on maple leaves that would never wash away. She was sorry.

There was a lot of magic here, in the tucked-away hills by the Canadian border. No way of knowing if this was a love spell, or a hate spell, or one to strip the flowers away from the ground whereon I stood.

"Oh, Alice," I whispered, and put the kettle upon the stove.

I drank the tea when it cooled. It tasted like the forest in midsummer.

The flowers fell out like cancer, shriveling away and fading into dust that coated the kitchen tiles. When it was done I flexed my feet, felt the muscles. They looked naked. A bare few days, and I'd grown used to the scent of roses.

The aloe was blooming in the kitchen floor. A butterfly hovered around one of the blossoms. I could pot them. There was a potter halfway to the city who threw solid pots for plants. She sold them by the roadside, painted Indian colours. Tourists bought them wrapped in newspaper fifty miles before the clattering painted sign on Alice's parked red truck. There was a market for growing things here, in the hills. They bloomed better. As if by magic.

I teased the daffodils from the shower drain and put them into water. They'd stood up against the onslaught of chemical soap and synthetic shampoo. I bundled them into a bouquet and brought them when I locked the house up for my week in the city office.

Perhaps on my way down, into the smoke and asphalt, I'd drop them off at Idaho.

Leah Bobet's short fiction has appeared in *On Spec, Strange Horizons,* and *Clockwork Phoenix 2,* and has been reprinted in several year's best anthologies; she is also the editor and publisher of *Ideomancer Speculative Fiction.* She is a fan of urban gardening, public space activism, all things 1920s, knitting, silent film, hockey, and fabulous hats. Her first novel will be published by Arthur A. Levine Books in 2012.
Visit www.leahbobet.com.

Escaping Salvation

by Josh Rountree &
Samantha Henderson

Perhaps you've heard of dust devils? Meet their considerably nastier relatives.

Illustration by
David Palumbo

Fifty miles outside Fort Stockton, on the hunt for dirt angels, I saw the red *empty* light glowing from the dashboard. It might as well have been a death sentence.

"Damn it, Roe! You were supposed to fill the tank."

"Thought you said you was gonna do it," said Roe.

"*You* fill the tank," I said. "You always fill the tank. It's your job."

"Well, hell then, I forgot," he said, eyeing the *empty* light like he might be able to will it back to full. Roe never had much sense, but he was always flush with excuses. I'd have found another hunting partner years ago but people crazy enough are damn hard to find. Roe ran his hands through his hair. Driest patch of land on earth and that man still looked like he combed it with motor oil. People always figure since he's a man and I'm a woman that we must have a thing going. But I say one look at Roe should erase that notion from any sane mind.

A flat blue sky glared blindly down at the hard-packed West Texas earth, and despite the heat it gave me the chills. If God's still here, he must see every little thing we do, know every stray thought, every tiny gesture. It wasn't a comforting thought.

"Is there anything ahead?" I leaned forward in my seat, peered up through the sand-scored windshield. Nothing but sky and sky and sky.

"Maybe a tent town. Nothing fortified." Roe's mouth hung open as he gaped at the flat expanse in every direction. Half the teeth were missing from his upper right jaw. He had a dirt angel's foot to blame for that. Just because they're made of dirt or sand or whatever else the wind will whip up doesn't mean they're not hard as nails.

"I know there's no fort towns nearby," I said. "I'm not an idiot. What I'm saying is we won't make it anywhere close to Fort Stockton before we're out of gas. We're going to have to walk."

"Sandstorm's coming," he said, pointing out to the west.

Crap. A towering brown wall spanned the horizon and wind buffeted the car. I sped up, as if there was any way to outrun it. The sand was maybe a mile off—wouldn't take long to get here. If we were lucky, we might be able to walk our way to civilization without being killed. We knew the creatures that lived out here better than anyone else; killing dirt angels and parting out the bits is how we earned a living. But a wall like that could be hiding an army of them, and Lord knows what else. Sniping the bastards as they formed in a swirl of sand and scrub and mesquite branches was one thing. Trying to survive a horde of the things in the open was laughable.

"Shit, Lizzy," said Roe, stabbing the windshield with a dirty fingernail. "There's a town!"

"No towns out here," I said, but I looked anyway, squinting against the sun.

"Right there!" he said.

And then I saw it: a tent town. Some band of nomads without the sense to live in a fortified city. Crazies that thought canvas walls and dumb luck were enough to keep them safe.

I hit the accelerator, headed for the village. I doubted we'd be any safer there than in the car, but the dirt angels were coming regardless, and maybe there'd be strength in numbers.

Ochre-colored sand pattered against the car, and although we'd rolled up the windows tight as we could, a few grains whirled around the interior. They had that heavy sweet smell, like hot blood, that meant angels were forming in the dark cloud behind us.

...maybe there'd be strength in numbers.

The tires chewed through the scrubby thistle that choked the landscape for miles around; they'd held up pretty good. But it was the gas I was worried about now, and suddenly the pedal beneath my foot felt lax, like it was pushing against thin air. A sick feeling hit my gut.

"Aw, hell," said Roe, as the engine sputtered over the howl of the approaching storm.

"You don't need to worry about it, Roe," I said between my teeth. "Angels won't get you."

"How you figure?" He turned to peer through the back window, rubbing a string of drool away from the ruined side of his face with the back of his hand.

"Because I'm gonna kill you first."

He grunted and faced forward, probably willing the tent town closer same as I was. The khaki structures had a squashed look, and no one was in sight. The inhabitants were likely crouched under the shelters, pulling down the tops of the tents to minimize their profile to the storm. If so, that was a good sign. It meant that they might know what they were doing. When dirt angels are forming, they grab at any high point in the landscape as a nexus to coalesce and take shape. If you stayed flat they might pass right over you, like a wildfire moving too fast to outrun.

The soil and scrub sloped gently down towards the flattened tents. With a last sputter of the engine I pulled the wheel sharply to the right, skidding us sideways through a small dune that banked the edge of the settlement. The brown boiling wall was almost upon us.

I kicked open the driver's door and turned to yell at Roe to grab the gear. For once he'd thought on his feet and had the dull green duffle tossed across his shoulder. We both dashed from the car and headed for the largest tent, collapsed like a big fabric pancake on the ground. The air was gritty and the roar of the storm closed in on all sides.

As we got to the tent the edge heaved up and I got a glimpse of a figure, shrouded around the head with coarse fabric, a pair of eyes shadowed inside. A slight pause, as the person no doubt reckoned the risk of letting us in versus the damage we'd do in desperation to find shelter, then the

heavy material was lifted enough for us to dive under. I landed belly-down on cords, groundcloth, and various hard objects while the roof was lowered, closing us in with the muffled sound of the storm, and the smell of dust, old canvas and live bodies.

"Who the hell are you?" someone growled. I made to answer but then the storm was on us and the only sounds left in the world were the rush of wind overhead, the shudder of the cloth as it struggled against the grips of all those holding it down, and the plaintive whines of potential dirt angels, spectral voices in search of bodies. I'd heard those voices plenty of times, but mostly from a distance. Hunting dirt angels, it was best to stay back while they formed, to make sure there were only one or two. You do that, you got a chance of taking them. But hearing those voices while in the teeth of the storm ran my blood cold.

One voice rose above the others, then a second one joined it. The clattering sound of sticks and stones and debris colliding in the air and the solid stench of decay, like ancient earth upturned. The muffled *pop* of car tires exploding one by one and the brittle crash of windshield and windows as they flew into shards. The hissing intake of air into a pair of new living vortexes as glass, rubber, earth, weeds, and rocks rushed together in a horrible act of creation.

I couldn't see much beyond the whipping flaps of the covering canvas, but I could reckon what was happening. There were at least two of them. Wraiths cobbled together with earth and debris. They'd be wandering eyeless and enraged, looking to complete themselves before the storm blew through and took with it their hopes of achieving a perfect body.

A sandy foot planted a few feet from our shelter. I could see talons flex and I sensed the thing sniffing for us. The only reason they hadn't found us yet was because their eyes formed last. Thank God their eyes formed last.

The sandstorm was mercifully fast, and it blew through in less than fifteen minutes, leaving only a gentle wind in its wake to rustle our covering. No one moved under the canvas. I listened, trying to determine if the angels had moved on or were lingering, waiting to spring on the first one that moved.

I lifted the edge just enough to get a good peek at the surroundings. One angel, kneeling beside my now-ruined car. Hands digging in the soil. Jamming clumps of the stuff into its empty eye sockets. Any others had moved on. Either that, or they were laying in wait beyond the range of my vision. No matter, it was time to act.

I'd only seen a couple of them with eyes before. I wasn't in a hurry to see more.

"Bring the bag," I whispered, then shimmied forward on my belly, crawling out from under the canvas. A few excited whispers and a quick grab at my ankles gave me the temperature of the locals. I kicked free, stood, and was relieved to see Roe slip in place beside me. Already he'd opened the bag, and he handed me my tomahawk. Next he pulled out his tiny bow. Damn thing looked like it was made for a kid, but I knew it had enough punch to send an arrow through an angel.

The angel got our smell, stood, and turned.

Roe already had an arrow notched, and he sent it razoring through the thing's chest. The angel shook, clods of dirt flying from its newborn body. The vaguely humanoid thing spread wide its wings and shrieked. A few sticks and stones clattered around it, and it began to fall apart from the point where Roe's arrow had struck. Then it was in motion, lifting into the air with one brutal lash of its wings. It crossed the distance between us in less than a second, and if I hadn't had my tomahawk ready it would have taken off my head.

The angel shrieked when my blade sliced clean through its wrist, and it slammed into the ground in shock, unable to control its momentum. I rounded on the monster just as Roe got it with another arrow, and when the thing turned to face me, I let fly with my tomahawk and the weapon planted itself diagonally across the angel's face.

The angel stilled. I pulled my tomahawk loose, satisfied the creature was dead.

Some angel hunters preferred guns with bullets notched and furrowed so they'd punch holes in the angels the same way Roe's arrows did. But guns are expensive, and keeping them in good repair is difficult in the desert. I preferred a weapon I could trust absolutely. More than a few angel hunters had charged in, guns at the ready, only to have the damn things jam with an angel bearing down. The results weren't pretty. Killing an angel wasn't pretty either, but a lot less red and wet.

Roe hit the thing a couple more times for good measure, but the angel was plainly dead. We'd killed enough of them to know.

"It's killed," said Roe, lowering the bow.

"Hell, I know that," I snapped, less annoyed than relieved.

We both reached into the bag and pulled out the long bladed, serrated knives we used for separating the angels up into their valuable parts. We went to work on the carcass, hurried by long experience. If you don't piece them out quick, they'll turn right back into the earth they came from and then the whole hunt's been for naught.

I worked on the neck, glancing at the thing's angry face, its empty eye sockets. I'd only seen a couple of them with eyes before. I wasn't in a hurry to see more.

"That's *our* angel," said a voice.

Roe and I turned, saw a tribe of ragtags dressed in rough homemade clothes. Most didn't even have shoes, but they all held weapons of some sort. I'd been so caught up in the kill that I'd forgotten the nomads. One of them stepped forward, a tomahawk similar to mine hanging loosely in her grip. She was a wiry woman, young and sun-scorched like the rest. She eyed the angel hungrily, and spoke

again. "We let you shelter with us. So that angel is ours."

"We killed it," I said, standing. "So back off." You had to stand your ground out here or else you'd end up dead.

Roe separated the angel's forearm from its elbow and tossed it at the woman's feet. "You want a piece? There you go. Arm's the best part, ain't it? Plenty of good meat." He laughed and the ruined side of his face looked all the more ghastly. Not for the first time I wished Roe would just shut up and let me take care of things.

"I don't want the arm," the woman said, hefting her tomahawk. "I want the eyes."

Roe laughed some more, earning a dirty look from the girl, and I just grinned.

"Eyes are the last to form," I said. "And that's a good thing, or it would be hard to get a jump on the bastards. What would you want with the eyes, anyway?"

Arms and legs, that's how we made our living. That's what folks wanted out here in the remains of Texas, other places too, for all I knew.

The girl glared at me, and walked to where Roe was dissecting the creature. She stared a long time into its hollow sockets, as if by willing it hard enough she could create what didn't exist. With a snort of disgust, she turned her head and spat. The dry sand soaked up the spot of moisture fast.

Not letting my nerves show, I stood cross-armed and casual by Roe as he went about his work. He wasn't brilliant, but he had a kind of genius to him when he parsed out one of these things, a delicacy that belied the violence of the work. He'd managed to separate a massive leg just above the thickest part of the thigh and there was no sign of disintegration as yet. Most hunters thought they did well to get one, maybe two limbs out of a kill—I'd never seen Roe bag less then two, and most often it was three and even four. I'd cut off one of the thing's hands and the rest of that arm was useless, so he wouldn't get a four-out here. But it looked like we'd have three to trade, at least. Two if they decided to keep the one Roe had tossed their way.

Eyes, the girl had said. Never heard of collecting the eyes. Must be nigh on impossible.

I looked past the girl at the other ferals. They were a well-organized lot, tugging and shifting canvases back in place. Faster than I expected, the tent city was back, a sturdy silhouette against sky tinged brown by the dying dust storm. Banners snapped from the apexes, yellow and dull red, giving the place an almost festive air.

The girl still stood beside me, and I saw that she wasn't just watching as the others worked—her gray eyes snapped back and forth across the campsite, missing nothing. The corner of a large tent sagged, and she frowned. As if in response there was a mighty tug and shuffle, and the cloth wall steadied and straightened. At her nod two women, girls really, but a little older than her, emerged from the same big tent and approached us cautiously. The dead angel's massive forearm still lay at the girl's feet. Wordlessly and competently the women produced a length of fabric and wrapped it up.

All right then. They did shelter us; I wouldn't argue about one arm.

The women walked back to the tent, one carrying the bundled arm like an improbable baby. The girl hadn't said a thing. Either her folk had great confidence in her, or great fear. Probably both.

"Your car's shot," she observed, shifting her gaze to me.

"True," I conceded.

"You plan on hiking back to Fort Stockton to get another?"

I shrugged. "Wouldn't be my first choice."

"So," she said, and squatted on the ground, hitting the compacted dirt lightly with the heel of her hand. I followed suit. Formalities must be observed when striking a bargain. Roe gave me a quick sideways glance and turned back to work. The business side of our operation was my responsibility.

"So we saved you from that angel," I said. "Guess you owe us something."

The girl laughed. "You didn't save shit. That angel wouldn't have known we were there if you hadn't jumped up like a fool and attacked it. Besides that, you attacked too soon."

"I don't need your advice on killing angels," I said.

"Maybe not," she conceded. "But you do need a way to get back home without hoofing it through angel country. You're liable to hit eight or ten sandstorms between here and there. You might know about killing angels, but you'll have a horde of them on your ass. You and your man won't beat those odds."

"He's not my man."

"Don't matter; you'd best wait for the caravan. Strength in numbers and all that."

"Billy's caravan?"

The girl nodded. "That's the one."

Everyone knew Billy Black. One of the old-school angel killers from the days before people figured out parts of them could be salvaged. Now he ran a trading business, moving from town to town with loads of canned goods, gasoline, toilet paper, angel parts, all kinds of salvage. His band traveled in numbers and was heavily armed, more or less a match for a roving band of angels. If he was coming through here, me and Roe could catch a ride to Fort Stockton. Might be the only way to make it back alive now that the car was trashed.

"When's he due back through here?" I asked.

"Hard to say," said the girl. "Billy keeps his own schedule. But he'll be through eventually."

"So what are you proposing?"

"Shelter, for you and your man."

"I told you, he ain't my man."

"Whatever he is. You can both shelter here. We have food, tarps, and water."

"In exchange for what?" I asked.

"A pair of angel eyes. And a tongue."

I snorted. "I've hunted over seven

"That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

years now and never met anyone that's harvested the eyes. And a tongue? What do you need one of them for?"

"That's the deal. Take it or leave it."

I could hear Roe's heavy open-mouthed breathing behind me, and the townspeople formed a suffocating ring around us. I didn't relish the thought of living out in the open with these people until Billy Black came this way again, but they had sheltered us, and the alternative was even less appealing. I held out my hand and the girl took hold.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Genj."

"Well, Genj, I'm Lizzy. I guess we have a deal."

Genj smiled, and I couldn't help but feel like I'd been maneuvered into some kind of trap. Like maybe Roe forgetting the gas had all been part of this wild woman's plans.

"Nice to meet you, Lizzy," she said. "Welcome to Salvation."

* * * *

Salvation was a shithole, but a well-designed shithole.

The tarps had all become tents again, and they formed a crude circle around a stone cook pit. Shallow trenches had been dug around the town limits, an old ploy for warding off angels, or at least turning them another direction as they formed. I'd never taken much stock in that defense, and they certainly hadn't done much to help out that morning, but the trenches made me feel a little safer anyway. Genj and her bunch had salvaged a couple of old port-a-potties from God knows where, and had scrawled BOYS and GIRLS across their respective front doors. For some reason I found that hilarious.

Dried food stores were kept in a series of mesquite-covered holes to keep them reasonably cool, and what precious canned goods they had were locked in a rusted, military footlocker. Genj had the only key. Despite this, the people of Salvation were surprisingly free with their water. Everyone seemed to have a full canteen, and more than once I'd been offered a drink. I even saw one man washing dishes. I intended to ask Genj just where the hell they'd found so much clean water. Even in Fort Stockton, people weren't that lax with the stuff.

Me and Roe squatted by the fire as an old man stirred up a mash of corn and beans in a cast-iron skillet. He introduced himself as Shooter, and his hands shook constantly. He was sun worn like the rest of them, and what remained of his white hair was long and thin. He squinted so hard his eyes were barely visible, just slivers of dull gray glass like some old cowboy from one of the film photos they had on display at the museum in Fort Stockton. The ones that would make a story if you looked at them one after another.

Out here justice was fast and rough. It had to be.

Someone had shot a coyote, and a couple of skinny girls were working that up for dinner too.

Genj had disappeared on some errand or other, then came back just as the sun began to dip over the flatland to the west. When she emerged from the long shadows, she had a teenaged girl with her, pale and pretty except for the fact that she didn't have any eyes. The flesh had knit fairly well around her sockets, but two black cavities were still mostly visible and it was an unsettling sight. Most folks lost eyes, they'd put a patch on or something. Genj tugged at the girl's overlong shirtsleeves and helped maneuver her into a sitting position next to Roe. He leaned closer to me and didn't have the decency to hide his spooked expression.

"We got guests, Bea," said Genj. The girl nodded, but thankfully kept her sightless gaze trained on the fire. "They say they're angel hunters." Genj looked at me. "This is Bea. She's my little sister."

"I'm Lizzy and this is Roe," I said, extending my hand and feeling stupid. The girl just nodded, but of course she didn't see my gesture. I wasn't sure if I should reach out and grab her hand to shake—then I noticed she still hadn't produced any hands from those long sleeves, and I yanked my arm back like I'd seen a snake.

Genj laughed. "Don't bother being delicate with Bea. She knows she's all fucked up."

"Damn sure is," said Roe, pressing so hard against me now that I thought he'd shove me right into the fire.

"Shut the hell up," I said.

Bea nodded vigorously, and I wasn't sure if she was thanking me or just agreeing with Genj.

Genj shoved Shooter out of the way and started stirring the bean and corn mix herself. "We got this little fresh spring nearby. I figure there's no use hiding it because you'll find out if you're here long enough. Don't tell nobody from the city or I'll gut you and that ain't no idle threat."

I believed her. "I noticed you weren't hurting for water."

Genj nodded. "So then, Bea here likes to hang out by that spring more than damn near anything else. Don't you, honey? One minute she's here, the next she's gone and you don't need to look nowhere else for her but that spring. One day, she's off there by herself and she knows better than to do it but she can't help it I guess. So we got a couple boys here, brothers, decide they'd have some fun. Caught her all by her lonesome, dug out her eyes, took her hands. Took her god damned tongue too. Guess they thought they were safe if she couldn't talk, or write, or point them out. They were wrong."

Roe looked ready to crawl on his knees alone to Fort Stockton if it got him away from Bea, but I saw her for what she was, just another victim of the broken world we'd all inherited from our god damned grandparents. Genj noticed him cringe and grinned.

"I staked them out in the badlands for what they did to Bea. Tentpoles through their hands and feet, and cut them just enough so the coyotes came the faster." She glanced at me sideways, maybe to see if I had a problem with that.

I shrugged. Out here justice was fast and rough. It had to be.

"Wasn't the Adams boys done it," said Shooter. He looked irritated that

Genj had relieved him of his cooking duties, and at the same time scared, like speaking up around Genj might be a bad thing. "Was an Injun. Comanche dead, mad at being dead, picking off the living one by one for what we done to them two hundred years ago."

"The hell it was." Genj rolled her eyes and stirred the food with new vigor. "I swear I hear about one more dead Indian and I'm gonna shove this spoon down someone's throat."

"It's as good an idea as any," said Shooter.

Genj glared at him. "It's fucking stupid is what it is."

"You got Comanche, Kiowa to blame for all of this." Shooter waved his arms around and a collective groan rose up from the Salvationers near the fire, as if they'd heard all Shooter's theories before and had long since grown tired of them. He knelt beside me and pinned me with a half-mad, all earnest look, like a preacher trying to force feed me religion.

"Injuns never wanted us here. That's a fact and can't be disputed. They fought tooth and claw to keep all them wagons and men and such from moving this way and setting up cities. You go to the city and you find yourself a book and you'll know that's the way it was. Well, then, them Comanche was licked but they bided their time and then when we was all high and mighty, they knew it was time to strike."

"I don't see how Indians could have caused the Walking Cough." I was hungry and tired and in no mood to humor the old man. "Two hundred years ago? They're dead and forgotten. You're just being foolish."

"Indians got long memories," he said, undeterred. "They pass them stories down from generation to generation. Don't even write things down like civil folk but just talk and talk and talk and if there's even one left I figure he's out there planning on what to do next to ruin us even more. This land is cursed and it's all because of the medicine the Indians put on it. We should have just left it alone. Now we got angels and devils and dead Indians cutting off little girl's hands. Makes a man eager to find a grave and be shut of it."

"Wish I had a cure-all for crazy," said Roe, and Genj burst out laughing. Shooter sniffed and shuffled away from the fire. Roe was coarse, but I was thankful he'd chased the old man away.

"He's a fair hand with a skillet or I'd boot him to the desert." Genj began ladling the hot muck onto plates and handed them around the fire. She tossed me her canteen and I drank greedily before handing it to Roe.

"I'd like to see this spring of yours," I said.

Genj gave me an appraising stare before smiling. "Well, I guess you ain't much use around here until another sandstorm heads this way. You can help me refill the water jugs and carry them back in the morning. Besides, I figure you could use a bath."

* * * *

The dawn light colored the sand and scattered rocks pink as I followed Genj and Bea towards a distant curving line of giant derelict windmills frozen by the passage of time. They stretched away along the top of the mesa, and their like could be seen on other small rises in the distance. I didn't see any trace of a spring and was beginning to wonder if it really existed, when we followed the hard-scrabble path around a fall of boulders and I saw where the mesa split into a shallow valley, floored in green.

That's why I'm out here.

I'd assumed Genj's comment about the bath was a wisecrack, but she was dead serious. No sooner had we reached the place where the spring pooled deep and blue, she stripped and waded in. I flinched, thinking about the scarcity of water and how casually she'd polluted the place, but she'd obviously done this before.

"Come on in," she said, but I just shook my head. The sight of that much water in one place, not in the precious, rusting tanks of Fort Stockton but out here under the hard blue sky, spooked me. I knelt beside the water, the lip of it dampening my pants at the knee, and stretched my hand over the surface, scarcely daring to touch the stuff.

Bea walked into the pool up to her ankles, then plopped down on her ass and stared sightlessly at her sister. There was some rabbit and coyote scat littered around, but now we had the spring all to ourselves.

I started filling the jugs and canteens, and presently Genj had returned to shore and dressed. She sat on a rock, close to Bea, and eyed the windmills over the lip of the shallow mesa.

"See them windmills?"

"Of course," I said.

"You're looking at the key to civilization."

"How do you figure?" I asked, rising, the weight of the jugs biting into my shoulder. Truth be told, I didn't have much interest in the windmills. I had a hard time pulling my gaze away from all that water.

"You know what they were for?" asked Genj.

"Nope."

"They made electricity."

"Bullshit." It was a foolish notion. Everyone knew electricity came in batteries, and those suckers were scarce as hens' teeth.

"You ain't as smart as you think," said Genj, grinning. "They're all rusted up now, but used to be the wind would catch them and they'd turn."

"I know what a windmill does," I said. "I reckon these were used to pump all this water."

"No they weren't. They'd turn and turn and turn and that would make the electricity. I read a whole book about it when I was a kid."

I didn't say anything. It was obvious she wouldn't hear any arguments. Bea turned toward us, nodding. I wished she'd stop doing that.

"We get those windmills turning again," said Genj, "then maybe we get this place back on track. That's why I'm out here. I ain't stupid. I know it's crazy to live outside the fortified towns. We all do. But someone's got to do it. I'll admit I'm goddamned obsessed with them windmills. Figuring

out how to get them going again. Used to be, people had more electricity than they could stand. What do you think will happen if we can get back there again? No more scrapping for batteries. Use cars and radio transmitters all you want. Maybe we could even build an airplane."

I'd heard enough. I stood, wiped the sand off my pants, and hefted two of the water jugs. "Sun is burning your mind. There ain't no such thing as airplanes."

"The hell there isn't," said Genj. "I seen a skeleton of one once. Up near Pecos."

"Well damn, I've seen 'em too. And maybe they did fly once. But those days are over for good, Genj. I'm going back to town before a storm blows in. You can sit here all you want figuring out how to bring a dead world back to life. You're so keen on fixing those windmills, why don't you climb your ass up there and do it."

She grinned that grin I was beginning to hate. "I would," she said. "But they'll kill me for it."

"Who'll kill you?"

"Angels."

Girl was even crazier than I thought.

* * * *

I got an earful on the walk back to camp. Genj used to live in a fortified town with its own crop of windmills, rusted and useless on the outskirts. Seems that she'd convinced herself she could fix one and snuck out one night to try but got chased off by a dirt angel that manifested itself between the poles. Not taking the hint, she tried again and all hell broke lose. Apparently, angels don't like the windmills, and Genj's efforts had brought them down in force on the town.

Town almost killed her for it, but some, especially kids, bought into her talk about windmills and electricity and airplanes, so they told her to hit the road with anyone that would follow her. So out she goes with her sister and a few other crazies to live in the desert. Knows about the spring because her mom told her about it: before the Walking Cough her family owned a store in the tiny town, crumbled to nothing now, that lived alongside the mesa. She takes her best guess at the direction and gets lucky.

There was a good chance she was full of shit. I've never known dirt angels to organize, and certainly not to gang together and attack a town. They were usually doing good just to keep themselves in one piece. And I couldn't imagine them caring one way or another about rusty windmills. Still, I'd seen enough crazy things in the desert that I was willing to consider the possibility.

But then Genj mentioned water angels.

"You believe what you want."

"I don't take much stock in tall tales," I said. "You're more likely to sell me on airplanes than water angels."

"I'm telling you, Bea saw one. She told me and she don't lie," said Genj.

I glanced back to where Bea followed, holding her stumps up in front of her empty eye sockets. She smiled vaguely and I shuddered.

"It was before she lost her eyes. She went to the water alone. Said she felt the wind blow in cold around that spring and then they just rose up like glass sculptures from the water. Didn't attack, didn't do nothing but stare at her and scare the hell out of her. She froze in place she don't know how long, scared to move, then all of a sudden the water angels evaporated. Bea says the wind whipped up again and blew all that mist her way. Said right then she lost all her fear because that mist felt like them water angels were giving her a whole bunch of good-bye kisses. You believe that? Sorry to say, but my sister was a little touched even before she lost half her parts."

"She was a *lot* touched if she's seeing water angels." I said.

Genj threw me a sullen look and shifted the weight of her cluster of canteens. I think she was starting to resent me. She was accustomed to being taken at face value, but I had a lot more sense than the loonies that populated Salvation. I could be sold a load of bullshit, but it had to be offered at a hell of a bargain. This time, I wasn't buying.

"You believe what you want," she said. "But I promise you, that girl don't lie."

* * * *

Me and Roe passed a few weeks in Salvation with no sign of Billy Black's caravan. We fell into the day-to-day chores, toting water, hunting for food and all that, but we also resumed our angel hunts, and already we'd bagged a couple of arms and half a wing. The arms were intact up to the shoulder and would fetch a mint when we got back to town. Arms like that could replace withered stumps and make the wearer stronger than sin. Hell, I'd known more than a few people who'd had a doctor take a perfectly good arm so they could attach the angel flesh. People were fucking crazy sometimes. The bit of wing we had could be pounded down and used to make healing tonics, psychedelic drugs, and all manner of things a sane person would never ingest.

We bagged a pair of hands one day, and brought them back for Bea. I asked Genj if Bea'd want them and she considered a while and said yes. I wish I'd never done it. Truth was, the girl's blank stares and blind nods were getting to me. Maybe with hands she'd let up.

I let Roe handle the burning. Call me gutless, but I couldn't hold that hot brand to Bea's smooth scarred stump. I stayed outside the tent, even. If I'm cursed to live a thousand years, I'll never get over the smell angel flesh makes when it knits itself to its human host, or the way human and angel seem to slither together like a nest of snakes beneath the flames. I've never worn any angel parts myself because it creeps me out so much.

And I'm not entirely convinced the angel flesh doesn't call to itself. I've seen too many folks with angel parts hunted down and killed by dirt angels. I hunt the things; I damn sure don't need them coming for me first.

As soon as Bea's new hands knit together, she started using them, but I couldn't tell as they did her a lot of good. She'd draw things in the dirt, and scribble symbols that might have been an attempt to write, but I couldn't make any sense of it. Genj would sit with her for hours, watching what she wrote, but eventually she'd huff away in frustration and I figured she was more put out than ever that her sister couldn't get across what had happened to her. Every time I saw Genj she'd jump on me about that tongue and them eyes. Got to where I tried to avoid her just so I could keep from hearing about it.

One day I dragged Roe along with me to the pool to get water. Roe never was much for company, but taking him along was a sight better than listening to more of Genj's nonsense. While I filled the jugs, he stood and stared up at the windmills, eyes squinting away the yellow sun.

"So Genj says they make electricity?" he asked.

"Genj says a lot of things," I said. "I wouldn't believe too many of them."

"Had to be some reason they were built," he said. "They're damn large to be used just to pump water. Ain't no pipes anywhere neither." Roe climbed up onto one of the scattered boulders and began picking his way up the side of the mesa. There was work to be done, so I wasn't surprised he'd found something else to occupy his attention. I shook my head, finished filling the jugs and put my bare feet in the pool. It was sinful, but Lord it was nice.

A few minutes later, Roe topped the mesa and stood at the foot of one of the windmills, rapped at it with his knuckles. He put his arms around the massive thing, like maybe he figured he'd climb it, but then withdrew them and put his hands on his hips. What the hell did he hope to accomplish, messing around with those things? I remembered then what Genj had said about the dirt angels getting pissed off when people fiddled with the windmills, and it sent a quick chill down my arms. But that wasn't the real thing to fear. The real fear was being away from the camp any longer then necessary. The real fear would come if dumb ass Roe was still on top of that mesa when the winds kicked up.

Even tall tales sometimes have a kernel of truth, so I'd turned the whole thing over in my head a time or two. Never was able to come up with a reason why dirt angels would want to keep the windmills still. Way I saw it, the more wind the better for them. I had my way, the wind would never blow a lick. The thought of water angels was even more vexing. I supposed such a thing was possible, and water was scarce so there was a slim chance they could have kept themselves hidden, particularly if they weren't attacking everyone in sight like the dirt angels. But if I started believing all the stories people told about what lived on the plains, I'd never have the nerve to leave town again.

No one knew where the dirt angels came from; just that they'd come in the wake of the Walking Cough. Me, I wasn't too interested in where they came from. I just wanted to kill them.

"No way up there," said Roe. I looked up at him and he really was trying to shimmy up the windmill shaft, a sheer pole far too big around to get a grip on. Dumb ass.

A hot wind kicked up and lifted my hair. I stiffened, looked around for signs of a storm. "Get down here and help out," I said. "And leave that windmill alone!" The wind hit me again, and tiny swirls of sand blew through the brush like rattlesnakes.

Even tall tales sometimes have a kernel of truth...

"Roe! Let's go."

Roe released the windmill, scampered back down the mesa, and helped me with the water jugs. The wind intensified, snatched at our clothes and crackled through brittle mesquite branches. Dust lifted around us, but it was just dust for now. We walked quickly, the sudden fear unspoken between us, and when the western sky turned brown, we dropped the jugs and broke into a sprint.

* * * *

The sandstorm beat us to Salvation, and by the time we got there, everything had already gone to hell. The world had turned utterly brown and we could hear the canvas tents flapping before we saw them. We hurried toward the town, and when we got close enough to make out details, we realized the angels had descended on Salvation in force. I thought about Roe fucking around with that windmill and guilt welled up inside me like bile.

Genj and her gang had done a fair job of fending them off, though not without cost. The broken bodies of at least a dozen Salvation kids were strewn around the camp. Five dirt angels lay decomposing back into the earth. Even with the danger at hand, part of me lamented the loss of those bodies.

One angel remained, and it was a hell of a specimen. Eight feet tall at least, biggest one I'd ever seen, and its wings were unfurled and driving up a storm, pulling more substance to itself, continuing to grow right before my eyes. Three of the Salvation kids had pierced the thing with arrows tied to thin ropes, like crude harpoons, and they tugged in opposite directions, trying to manipulate the angel and keep it still while others darted in with spears and axes. A man tried to sneak up from behind with his blade, but one of the angel's thrashing wings clipped him in the jaw and drove him to the ground. He rolled away, one hand holding the flesh to his ruined face, and the angel whipped its head around to scream at him as he fled.

That's when I got a real good look at the monster's face. It was an abomination of weeds, rocks, and what looked to be bits of glass.

And the fucker had eyes.

"Jesus Lord."

"Look out!" yelled Genj, ducking and weaving around the perimeter. The angel whirled and struck at a young women who was about to spear it in the back of the leg. The spear

snapped in half and so did the girl, bending back at an obscene angle, suspended for a second before she crumpled, broken, to the ground.

I moaned involuntarily. I'd fought near to a hundred of these things, but never one so powerful. My hand fell to the tomahawk strapped at my side. I took a tentative step forward, then the angel turned, saw me, *looked* at me with those eyes. I've only seen a couple of angels with eyes before, and I'd never seen any eyes like these. I stared into them, and I just froze, my weapon dangling useless at my side. My knees felt weak.

The angel didn't relent. It battered back its attackers, but it kept its gaze locked on me.

Oh, God. Those eyes.

I heard Roe whoop, then he ran past me, an arrow ready. He let fly and it struck the angel right in the throat, passed clean through. Bits of the angel blew out the back of its neck and its horrible, birdlike scream stopped. The angel lurched then, pulled two of the harpooners off their balance and yanked free from their arrows. The monster pulled its gaze away from me and keyed on Roe. One second Roe was notching up another arrow, the next he was cold and still as a statue, eyes locked with the angel, jaw slackening.

I shook off my paralysis. God, those eyes. What the hell was it with those eyes? The tomahawk was in my hand, the handle smooth and warm and good in my grip. I hefted it and ran toward the angel.

It stared expressionlessly at Roe, close now. Before I could reach it, the angel had one talon on Roe's head, stroking it like you would a puppy you were about to have put down. Roe didn't move; he just stared. Then the angel began to *press*.

Howling, I slammed my tomahawk into the creature's side, shattering a huge pane of glass it had incorporated into itself. Bit of windshield from our car, like enough. It deflected my blow and the angel swatted me aside. I slammed into one of the big water barrels and the wood shattered beneath me, spilling warm water over me like a summer monsoon.

The thing turned its attention back to Roe, pushed him down and pinned him through like a lab specimen with one long talon. Roe didn't even shriek; he was still under its thrall.

The angel seized the thin flannel shirt over Roe's belly and the skin beneath it, tore both away like wet paper. Finally, Roe began to scream.

The angel poked casually at the raw red slab of exposed muscle before splitting it down the middle. Loops of intestine spilled out on the yellow sand.

Roe began chanting. "Oh help me help me oh my lord help me." The monster continued to poke and prod like a scientist examining the biology of some alien creature, even as Genj and her gang circled it for a renewed assault.

I screamed, took aim, and let fly with my tomahawk. It struck home with a solid, meaty thunk, dead in the center of Roe's skull. He stilled, and the angel looked up at me again. Its face reformed into an angry, wailing hole and it spun toward me in a rage, those eyes locked on me again.

Told you I'd kill you before them angels could, Roe.

Then I fell again beneath the weight of the monster's stare and cold darkness closed in around me.

* * * *

I woke to Genj wiping my forehead with a wet cloth. I was in the tent Roe and I shared, and only a thin sliver of sunlight crept in through the narrow door flap. My head ached like I'd got some bad liquor.

She had no idea what she'd done to her sister.

The angel. Roe. Those eyes. I flinched as I remembered, and Genj held me down when I tried to jump up from my pallet.

"Hang on,' she said. "You need to keep still. Not sure what that angel did to you, but it messed you up. You're lucky as hell we killed that bastard before it did the same thing to you it did to your man."

"He's not...he wasn't..." I gave up. "Those...those eyes." My throat burned when I spoke, and I couldn't manage more than a faint whisper. I tried to sit up again but Genj held me down without much effort. I felt clammy and cold and I couldn't shake whatever that monster's gaze had done to me. Each time I blinked I saw things, red bloody things, Roe's guts, shattered bones, strips of skin. If I could've screamed I would've.

"I know," she said. "It had eyes. I only half believed it was possible until I saw them. You and your man messed with the windmills, didn't you?"

"They're...you've got to..." My voice was a whisper.

"Don't worry," she said. "I ain't mad. I should be, you getting folks killed and all. But we were rewarded. You didn't piss them off, they'd have never come in such force. We'd have never had them eyes and that tongue. It was meant to be. Bea says so."

Genj laughed as she poured some more water on cloth. She put it back on my forehead and squeezed. Streamers of warm water coursed down the side of my face.

"The...eyes."

"Hush. They're safe. They're in a good place now."

"Hurts...fuck, it hurts."

Genj looked down at me with an understanding smile, and she spoke in a quiet, peaceful voice as if she were trying to reassure a child who's scared of the dark. "Don't worry, Lizzy. I know all about those eyes. I'm sorry they hurt you. But you're going to be rewarded. Bea says you're part of this now. You can be one of us."

"No. Crazy bitch."

Genj laughed good-naturedly. "Hell, you're already starting to get some of your old spark back. Bea said you would."

"Crush those...eyes. Powder."

I looked into Genj's eyes and they were nearly as bad as the angel's. Something that lay inside her, barely restrained, had broken loose. She looked to me like a sinner who'd laid eyes on the Christ.

"I've already put them eyes to use. The tongue too. Water angels say that's the most important part. I can't hardly think of her as my sister anymore. She's beautiful...better? I guess that's it. She's better. We're all better for it. Those windmills—I thought I'd be a hero if I got them up and running. Feels like a waste. Way Bea tells it none of that matters now that the water angels are coming back. Gonna be a hell of a world. We have a future, and Bea can see it.

They looked delicate as the blown glass goblets I'd seen in a church at Fort Stockton, a lifetime ago.

I blinked tears away. The angel's stare still burned in my skull, shattered like a kaleidoscope with a hundred unwelcome images. Roe's eyes bulging as the angel tore him open. Bea opening the dark chamber of her empty mouth wide. The pool in the split mesa, boiling and red as blood.

I shook my head, trying to dislodge the pictures. Something bad was going down. I had to focus.

Genj must've killed the angel after I passed out, else I wouldn't be in one piece. She must have salvaged the eyes and tongue and joined them with her sister. Of course she had. She had no idea what she'd done to her sister. Those eyes.

And water angels, still going on about water angels. It was all I could stand. I pushed myself up, managed to get into a sitting position without Genj holding me back. She took a step back and put her hands on her hips, seemingly satisfied that I was on the road to recovery.

"Damn, you're stubborn," she said.

"You need to get...eyes out of her," I whispered.

She frowned. "Those eyes ain't yours. I killed it."

"Don't care...whose eyes. Get them out."

She shook her head. "It's just never gonna make sense to you, is it? This is the way things are supposed to be. This is the fucking plan, Lizzy. You think some fool just come along and cut Bea up like that? Hell no. It wasn't the Adams boys and it wasn't no dead Comanche spook, neither. I done that to her. I love her and you wouldn't understand a goddamn thing about that, would you?"

I stared. "How could you? She's your sister." Another image floated by, frozen like an old picture in a book—a boy's hand pinned to the ground, a coyote's eyes gleaming as it crept near.

Her eyes were glazed as glass. "I'm sorry as hell if that upsets your sensibilities but we don't have to hide nothing anymore. She's whole, just like the water angels promised. She was simple as a baby and now she's whole and who the hell are you to deny her something like that? Them water angels promised her they'd send pieces to make her better and they did. Sent their servants, didn't they? You think you're better than us but you're wrong. We're better. Bea's got a destiny, and so do I. And that's a hell of a lot more than you got to hang your hat on."

"God...crazy."

"Tell you what, angel hunter," said Genj, wiping her hands on her jeans. "It's about dark and you done worn out your welcome. Get on your feet and start hiking. You can take your chances with the desert. We don't want you here no more."

She slipped out of the tent and left me shaky and weak, tears and dirty water drying on my face. She'd taken those eyes and given them to Bea. Roe was dead, I wasn't sure if I could walk, and I was stuck fifty miles from civilization with a band of lunatics.

I tried my legs and they worked. My head swam with horrors, and I was still a little dizzy, but I wasn't staying here where that crazy bitch-girl was queen.

I found my tomahawk by the makeshift bed and strapped it on. Still had a little of Roe's blood on it. I felt better with it at my hip.

I pushed back the tent flap and stepped into dusk's lengthening shadows. The people of Salvation were about their duties, though a few stopped to look at me with uncertain expressions. I wondered how many of those people still thought they were on a mission to restore civilization, and how many realized they were following a lunatic. I nodded to a couple and headed for the edge of town, hoping to slip away without running into Bea or Genj.

Just my luck, as I left Salvation behind, I spotted the two of them, barely more than spots on the horizon, headed in the direction of the pool.

"Fuck me."

They were up to something. Every ounce of common sense told me to run like hell the other way, but I thought about Roe and I thought about those eyes and I knew I couldn't just leave those psychos to their business.

I turned to follow them, every step an effort.

* * * *

They reached the pool ahead of me, and by the time I got there Bea was thigh deep in the water, her skirts lifting up so they floated on the surface like foam. Her back was to me, but her new angel hands were at her sides, spinning circles on the surface of the water, faster and faster as if she was writing on a sand table. Genj knelt at the edge of the water, watching her sister intently.

I crept closer, terrified that Bea would turn around and look at me. But it was no sense keeping quiet. What had I come to do, kill them? I'd killed plenty of angels, but never a person.

"Hi, Lizzy," said a musical voice, a beautiful, heartbreaking, glorious singsong voice that made my knees buckle. I knelt rag-legged on the ground.

Genj whipped her head around, saw me and smiled. "That tongue of hers is something special, ain't it?"

I nodded, not sure what else to do. How had Bea even known I was there? She had so many angel parts now; maybe she was infected with whatever magic made them. I tried to stand but Bea dropped me with her words

again. "Just sit tight, Lizzy. Nothing bad's gonna happen to you. I promise."

Her hands moved quicker, and the surface of the lake began to roll like the ocean. Genj stood and backed away as if to give the water room to grow.

Bea began to sing, not in words I could understand, but in a lilting language that tore at the heart.

The boiling intensified, peaked, and two figures rose from the water. A third joined them, towering over us.

Water angels. They were not crudely formed monsters like the dirt angels; they looked delicate as the blown glass goblets I'd seen in a church at Fort Stockton, a lifetime ago. As they rose they caught the moonlight and held it in their transparent bodies. They wore waterfalls like skirts, and the waters that made them were constantly in motion, like lifeblood pumping through their bodies. I stayed on my knees, jaw hung open in an unwitting imitation of Roe. I was stunned by the creatures. They looked like nothing short of gods.

Genj was similarly impressed, but she was afraid too. I could see it in the way her smile faltered, in the way she began to back away from them. Bea stayed in the water.

She didn't even flinch when the water angels began screaming.

I covered my ears and screamed along with them. Their voices sounded like saws cutting through concrete, and the noise threatened to shatter my bones. Genj had her ears covered too, and beneath her tan and the dirt on her face she was white as chalk.

You didn't expect this, I thought.

Dirt rose from the valley floor, spinning around the mesa walls like a small whirlpool. Abruptly the angels stopped screaming, and in the ensuing silence I saw a good dozen fully formed dirt angels surrounding us.

"That one," said Bea, pointing to her sister.

Genj was frozen in place, then tried to run. Too late. One dirt angel blocked her easily, while the other casually took her left arm, considered it for a second, then tore it from her body.

I tried to stand, thought about sending my tomahawk through Genj's brain like I'd done Roe, but Bea simply said, "Stay put," and that was that, I was stuck in place. It took about ten seconds for the angels to reduce Genj to pieces, then they all turned their eyes to me, waiting for Bea to speak again.

"She's nice," said Bea. "Don't hurt her, okay?"

The dirt angels backed away and formed a loose perimeter around the pool. I was on my hands and knees, breathing hard, trying not to vomit, when Bea turned, waded out of the water and knelt down in front of me in her muddy skirts.

"Do you have a sister?" she asked.

Her voice was the chiming of a silver bell, the warble of a bird at morning. I couldn't bear it.

I shook my head, kept my gaze aimed at the dirt.

"Mine was mean. She loved me, I know that. But there was always something in her that wanted to hurt me."

She looked up at the nearest angel and I flinched away from the sight of her eyes. "When I was five, six, we were fetching water from the cistern. There was no one else around and when I was reaching down to scoop up the water she pushed me in. And then she held my head under. To see how long I could hold my breath, she said."

She smiled sadly. "Someone came along and got me out, although I wasn't right in the head for a long time. Genj got beat, real bad. More for fouling the water than for hurting me."

I understood. It seems harsh, but I understood. Water was everything.

"Genj was nicer to me then. Almost too nice. She looked after me, protected me from anyone who would tease me. Thing is, Lizzy, since she stuck my head under? I've heard voices, beautiful voices singing to me. And I think she knew that, and was jealous."

It was all the more horrible for being said in that beautiful voice.

"I forgave her, you know. Came with her to this place with the rest of them. I had faith in Genj. She was going to change everything. Back to how it was before. But out here, out by the water, I learned it can't ever be the way it was before. The voices in my head, they spoke louder to me here. The time of mankind is passing, and now comes the time of all that men are made of. I tried to tell Genj that. I tried to tell her that if I could see them, talk to them, touch them, I might know what was happening.

"And so she cut out my eyes and my tongue and my hands, and told herself that was what I wanted."

Her voice was the chiming of a silver bell, the warble of a bird at morning. I couldn't bear it. "She should have been nicer to me, Lizzy. You think?"

"Maybe so."

"Maybe so. Right. Well, too late now."

"Yep."

"I kind of like you, Lizzy. You want to go home?"

Still looking down, I nodded.

"You can go," she said. She stood and helped me to my feet. My legs were unsteady. I was about to keel over again when she caught me, and then without thought I looked up, our eyes met, and the universe fell open and exposed itself in one violent motion. My spirit shuddered with me and suddenly I was completely underwater, in the ancient oceans that used to cover this place, and the water angels, the water *people* were there in all their glory. They lived in cities with silver towers and no walls, strolled through gently swaying fields of flowers, laughed and fell in love and never dreamed of the day the ground beneath them would rumble and the water would dry away and huge blasts of wind would lift their ancient buried servants from the earth in a rebellion that would send them screaming to their dry deaths and hiding out in raindrops.

And I saw the dirt people, ruling

this place until men came with their spears. The dirt people weren't afraid of them at first, but the men continued to multiply until at last they began to drive the dirt people back into the earth. I saw the Indians, finally driving the last of them to their graves with tomahawks just like mine, and they ruled this land until the white men came. That was the end for them too. Guns and liquor and diseases and railroads and oil and death. These new men seized the land and held it for a while, a very little while. But most of them believed it was their land. Land they owned. Land they'd always owned and always would.

The world shifted around me again and people started hacking up blood. The new men had their day, but they couldn't fight their own crumbling civilization. They couldn't fight the Walking Cough. The disease struck like lighting, blackening the world with sudden death. The few that remained, scrambled to put some semblance of society together again, but things were not the same. They held no power over the land now. Quietly at first, and then with wild abandon, the dirt people rose up. There weren't enough men to stop them anymore.

All the while, the water people watched and waited, spies living in the lakes and springs and storm clouds.

A girl was born, and died, and was born again in a border town cistern, and she could hear them whispering to her, telling her that she could see them and bring them back into being if she would take the flesh of the dirt people and make it her own, feel with their hands and speak with their tongue and see with their eyes and use the ancient knowledge deep and residual within them to call the water people back. The one who would sing the song that would bring a fallen nation out of hiding.

The rains would fall again, and this time they would never, ever stop.

I felt Bea's pain then, hands hacked away from tender wrists, eyes scooped away, and worse, the agony of joining with the dirt angel's flesh, and I was screaming, me, Lizzy, with my own mouth and soul. The pain was really mine now and I thrashed and shoved away and felt myself go backwards over a rock and onto my ass.

I stumbled to my feet, my throat raw with screaming, and turned away from Bea. What the fuck had that psycho done to me? I kept my eyes down, terrified she'd pull me back into the nightmares of her eyes.

"You understand, don't you?" said Bea, and God help me, that beautiful voice made me want to look at her again. I resisted. "It was always me that was going to change things, not Genj."

"You're both goddamn crazy!"

"Don't be mean, Lizzy. Okay? Don't be like Genj."

I turned away from her and walked slowly between the two nearest dirt angels. They let me pass. Once I was sure they weren't coming after me, I started to run.

Bea began singing again and for a dreadful moment the music of her voice almost drew me back, but I shook it off and stumbled forward. Black storm clouds crept slowly in from the west, rumbling and roaring and crackling with lightning. One by one, drops of rain began slapping the ground, wetting my shirt, the back of my neck. When I blinked I saw images, fast and jagged as a flash of lightning: Bea's face, uplifted to the rain, the water pooling in her dirt-filled eye sockets, mud trickling down her cheeks.

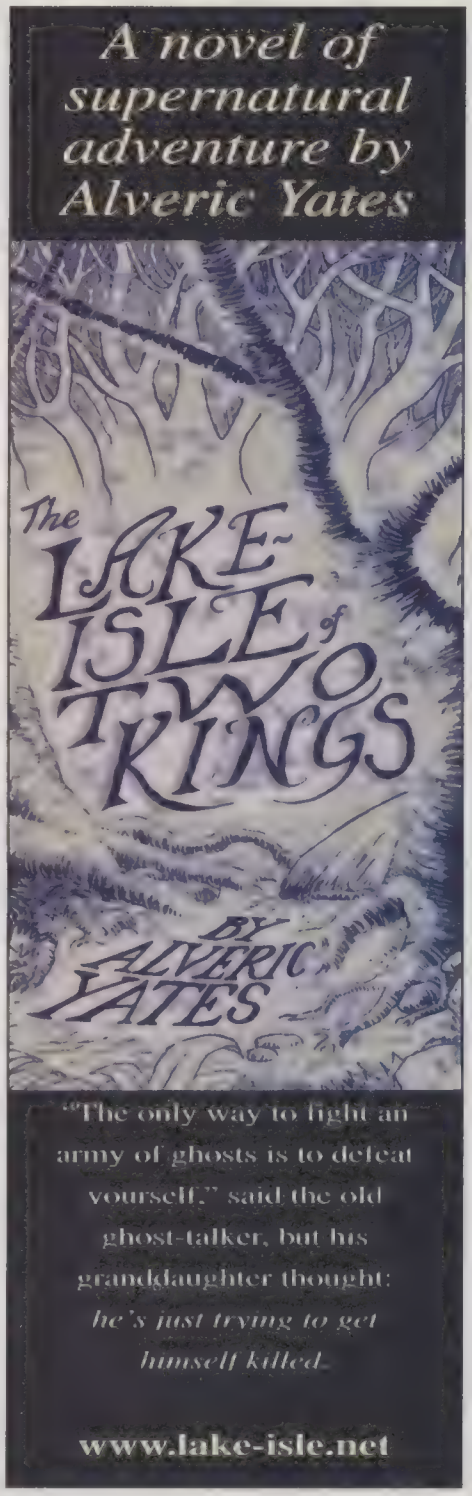
The rain pattered the ground, dampened down the dust. I had to get to Fort Stockton and warn them. Maybe if we could live in a world of dirt we could live in a world of water.

Didn't seem likely.

Mud under my feet, I ran as fast as I could away from Salvation.

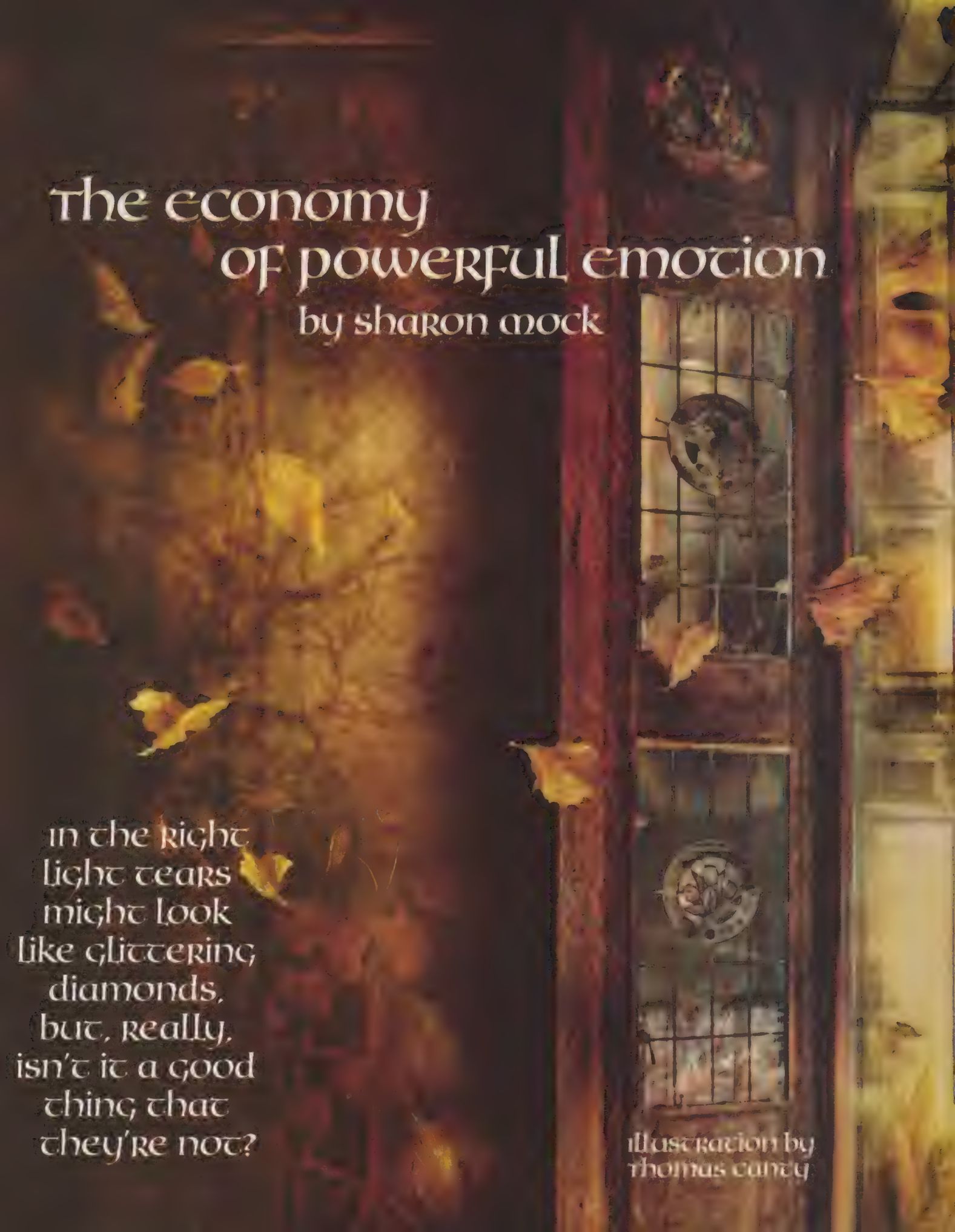
Josh Rountree's stories have appeared in *Realms of Fantasy, Electric Velocipede, Polyphony 6,* and a number of other magazines and anthologies. His short fiction collection, *Can't Buy Me Faded Love,* is available from Wheatland Press. For details and links to more of his fiction, visit www.joshroundtree.com.

Samantha Henderson's short fiction has been published in *Strange Horizons, Realms of Fantasy, Clarkesworld, Fantasy,* and the anthologies *Running with the Pack* and *Steampunk Reloaded.* She writes for Wizards of the Coast, and together with Kendall Evans she is the co-winner of the 2010 long-form Rhysling Award for speculative poetry for "In the Astronaut Asylum." Her story "Bottles," previously published in *Realms of Fantasy,* was made into an award-winning short film in 2009.


A novel of supernatural adventure by Alveric Yates
The Lake-Isle of Two Kings
By Alveric Yates
"The only way to fight an army of ghosts is to defeat yourself," said the old ghost-talker, but his granddaughter thought: *he's just trying to get himself killed.*
www.lake-isle.net

The Economy of Powerful Emotion

by Sharon Mock



In the right light tears might look like glittering diamonds, but, really, isn't it a good thing that they're not?

Illustration by Thomas Canty

1

Once upon a time, there was a princess who wept jewels from her eyes.

2

A day of celebration. A dual celebration: a long-awaited peace treaty, a longer-awaited child for our King. Doves swoop and flutter in the cloudless sky. The King's Highway fills with revelers, merchants and scholars and soldiers' wives. We all wear our finest clothes. All our finest clothes are faded with age. A beggar leans against a jeweler's door and gnaws on a crust of bread.

3

The old woman remembers.

She's been in this chamber before. There's always room, in time of war, for a cackling crone of wisdom and power. There's never room, in time of peace, for a witch who balks at surrender.

But this is a celebration. The King's only child is born. The old woman does not mean to dwell on old slights and lingering wounds.

Nor does she mean to think of her son's broken body laid out at the tideline for the sea to claim.

Still, she remembers.

4

So spoke the witch, with her words full of good intentions and her heart tainted with secret darkness: "May your daughter be our greatest treasure. May her soul be filled with kindness and mercy, and may she be an ornament to this land forever."

The subjects cheered. The noise startled the infant Princess, who awoke and began to cry. And as the King watched in amazement, tiny diamonds formed in the corners of the baby's eyes.

5

The Queen paces the halls, daughter sleeping fitfully in her arms. There are tiny lacerations at the corners of the baby's eyes, where facets slice the thin and tender skin. The Queen paces, croons, sways, looks over her shoulder. Soon the King will notice the silence. Soon the King will wake.

6

The Captain knows he's lucky. Most of the companies have been disbanded with the armistice, but his men patrol the disputed border. Though there's peace now, only a fool leaves borders unguarded.

"may your daughter be our greatest treasure."

He eyes his remaining men with a jeweler's appraisal. They're all farmers' boys, cracked rather than proved by their previous battles. Oh, there are a few true soldiers among them, men he would not mind at his back in a fight. Not many.

"Find me some mercenaries to go with our new blades," he says, and drops a bag of the King's diamonds into his lieutenant's hands.

7

And all through the castle, the servants sing and play music to drown out the cry and clatter of the Princess's tears.

8

The enemy has three sons and no wealth. The fresh outbreak of war is a burden. They beg for peace, but why should the King listen? Soon their coffers will be empty. Soon their nation will fall.

"He has a daughter," muses the eldest son.

"She's just a baby," the second says in disgust.

"That doesn't matter. It's politics."

The third boy looks up from his book of fairy tales. He has just learned to read.

"And they won't let anybody see her. She must be terribly ugly."

"She could hardly be uglier than our heads on a pike."

The second son has no answer for that.

The eldest son leaves in the morning to ask the King for his daughter's hand in marriage. He never returns.

9

One day the Princess discovers that she has run out of tears. She can still scream, yes, and beg; but her eyes remain resolutely dry.

She sits at the side of her mother's coffin. She cannot attend the Queen's funeral, because she might weep. But she's allowed to sit vigil as long as she likes, because she might weep.

The room chills. When servants bring dinner, their breath leaves frost in the air. The Queen's body remains odorless and incorruptible.

The Princess does not ask how her mother died. Her father will tell her, if he thinks it will fill the coffers more.

10

We don't go hungry any more. Our King's wealth brings us fruits and meats from distant lands, all spoiled from the journey, but still edible. Roads maintained by prisoners of war spare our axles and wheels. Our silk and wool is freshly dyed. We could even dance in robes encrusted with jewels, if we did not think the King would have us butchered for our daring.

Peace was better. But none of us say that, not even the children, not even when they stand over their fathers' graves.

11

She became like her tears, hard and cold, until she took to sitting in the castle's larder to keep the milk fresh. By then it did not matter, for the Kingdom's treasury overflowed with perfect diamonds, enough to last for centuries. But the failure weighed on her regardless.

12

The second son returns from his first campaign. He has escaped with his life. Most of his men were not

so lucky. "Where do they get all that money?" he asks the room.

The youngest son looks up from his arithmetic. "The bards say," he says, "that in the south there's a beautiful princess who weeps jewels from her eyes."

"Then perhaps I should marry her and bring her home," the second son suggests.

"One of us tried that already."

"You think the King's daughter makes him rich? That would explain a lot."

"Jewels buy less and less these days. Sooner or later they'll do him no good at all."

"But will we still be alive by then?"

The youngest son scowls his reply.

"The answer's clear. We must cut our enemy's wealth off at the source."

"You'd kill an innocent girl," the youngest son asks, "for daring to weep?"

The second son leaves the castle at night so as not to answer his brother's question. Only his head returns.

13

The King hires physicians and magicians to restore his daughter to health and sorrow. One recommends bloodletting, though the alchemists' efforts to refine rubies from the Princess's humours fail utterly. Another brews potions that make the Princess vomit. A third weaves strange sigils under moonlight, making use of the chiurgeon's excess blood.

All of them fail and are put to death. Their deaths move the Princess to tears no more than anything else they have ever done.

One radical young scholar from the Academy diagnoses pernicious ennui. He prescribes fresh air, exercise, exposure to new experiences and ideas. Her eyes remain dry, but color returns to her cheeks. The scholar warns that full recovery will take time. He's allowed to stay in the tower, for now.

14

The jeweler places the ring back in the widow's hand. "Ten silvers for the metal," he says. Diamonds are hardly worth buying. "That's all I can give you. I daresay the memory is worth far more."

She stares back. Memory is worth much, yes, but a full belly is worth near any price.

"You might go south," he suggests. "They can afford to feed their poor."

The widow spits and stalks out. Let others stumble across the battle lines for a bowl of gruel. She will never beg from those who took her man from her.

15

The third son looks up from his grimoire. He can't read a single word, but he likes the patterns. "It's not her fault," he tells the hounds, since he's out of brothers. "It's a curse. And somebody needs to break it, for her sake as well as our own."

One hound licks his hand. Another scratches behind its ear.

He doesn't say where he's going. He won't be allowed, otherwise. He tries to have hope—he's got the third son's luck—but truth be told he wakes each night expecting the prick of the blade at the back of his neck.

16

what could go wrong, with a stockpile of diamonds to pay the way out of any difficulty?

A soft-handed peasant wanders the country, collecting stories of princesses with jewels in their eyes. The crows and the mice pass the information through the dirt and the trees. Spies pass the same information, only more slowly. But the old woman knows the poor boy has only so much time.

She rises from the stool, spindle-thin. She eats little, and has not slept in years. Guilt is her closest companion. She never meant her wishes to come true this way.

From the weaving-frame she plucks a golden bridle. She hobbles to the cliff and tosses the bridle into the sea. "Will you help me put things right, my child?" It's his choice. If he refuses, if he does not come, she will let it be.

17

The horse stares, and the third son stares back.

He's well-read. He knows the rules. That bridle is maiden's hair, and the old woman a witch. So the horse must be somebody transformed by a spell. Probably, given how strong and noble he looks, a prince of some sort. His eldest brother? But in that case he thinks he'd know.

He sinks down with his back against a tree. "Whatever we've done to you," he says, "I'm sorry."

The horse stares, and turns to the stream, and drinks like he's never tasted fresh water before and never will again.

18

The boy says the horse is a gift for the King. The stablemen accept the gift at once. But since the horse refuses to let anybody else take the reins, they're obligated to bring the boy in too.

The King is delighted. Even if the beast can never be ridden, they can use it for breeding. His advisors advise caution, as advisors do. But the radical scholar (who has himself read a fairy tale or two in his day) suggests that the horse's beauty and health might have a salutary effect on the Princess's delicate constitution.

The horse stays. The boy is confined to the stables, as a precaution. What could go wrong, with a stockpile of diamonds to pay the way out of any difficulty?

19

The air chills, as though the sun has gone behind a cloud. The third son shivers. He is alone in the stables, or has been. Now a scullery-maid watches him, face pale and emotionless. She is no more a scullery-maid than he is a stableboy. But he does not think it polite to notice that fact.

"That is a beautiful horse," she says, as one might comment on a well-turned slice of toast.

"Thank you, miss. He's a gift to the Kingdom. Still wild, but maybe that will change in time."

The Princess does not ask how that will change, or why he speaks with an unfamiliar accent.

20

The next morning, as the bakers began their daily work, they found the flour had gone soggy and had to be thrown out.

21

A cold wind blows through the stables, setting the horses to bucking and snorting. That damned Princess again. She unsettles the horses so. The stablemaster would ask the King to keep her away, but the King, he dotes on his daughter. All he's got left. Won't hear a word against her.

The stablemaster peers over the wall to watch her progress. She stops, again, at the white stallion's stable. Says something he can't hear at this distance. The horse leans down and rests his nose in her hand, blows a plume of breath into her palm.

Witches, the lot of them.

22

That night, no kindling would take light, only smolder damply, so that the King himself had to dine in darkness.

23

The third son breathes out a plume of frost, and his hands shake in a way that has nothing to do with the cold. "That is a beautiful horse," the maid says. "Might I ride him?"

The prick at his neck inspires caution. "What if someone sees?"

The Princess tosses pretense away with a wave of her hand. "They won't," she says. "I've sent them all away."

But the radical scholar sees, from his locked room in the King's tower. Sees the boy who is not a stableboy lead the horse that is not a horse, with the Princess who is not a scullery-maid on its back. Sees the Princess lower her face to the horse's mane, sees—or imagines he sees—her smile secretly in delight.

He's a scholar, he knows stories. Knows there's no place for someone like him in stories like these. He wonders again whether he'll end up released by the Princess, or put to death by the King.

"It's not a curse," she says, uncertain. "It's a blessing."

24

That night, water seeped from the mortar of the castle's walls, water salty as the sea, salty as tears. Architects found no leaks. Sorcerers dispelled no curses. The King locked himself in his treasury, counting precious jewels.

And in the commotion, the Princess slipped away.

25

She wears a chambermaid's dress, smuggled out of the laundry three weeks ago, and her sturdiest shoes. Her pockets are filled with nuts and dried fruit. In her arms she carries several winter blankets to protect the boy and his horse from her cold. She's considered escape for as long as she can remember, but duty to her father and the Kingdom has always stopped her. Now it's different. There's somebody to help her. And he can help her cry.

She hasn't figured out yet that the boy is a Prince. She thinks maybe he's the radical scholar's friend. He told her about an island far out to sea, belonging to no country, where the first rays of the rising sun heal everything. It would be good to be able to cry again. Maybe if she can cry all by herself, her father will leave her alone.

She enters the stable and bows to the white horse, who kneels to let her on his back. She drapes a blanket across him.

The boy who is maybe a radical scholar stares at her in surprise. "Take me to the island," she orders, like a proper princess. "Or I will go alone."

26

The horse knows his way. He's going home. For a night and a day he rides, not stopping to eat or drink, not slowed by the weight of two humans on his back.

He takes them to a desolate beach far to the north, near the disputed border. It's almost sunset. There's a hut on the cliff and a rowboat on the shore. The girl with cold hands removes the golden bridle. "He deserves to be free," she says, and tosses the bridle into the sea.

And so he follows, dissolving back into foam.

27

The island is smaller than the Princess's bedchamber, with a single crowning oak tree and a crescent of sand just large enough for the rowboat. She helps the boy pull the boat ashore. Then they sit to wait for sunrise. The salt on the hair of her arms reminds her of frost.

28

"So who are you really?" the Princess asks.

"Really?" He's embarrassed. "I'm a Prince. I thought I'd come here to find where your father's money came from, but mostly I think I came to help you."

"Oh." Her voice is small under the weight of unwanted memories. "I thought you were a radical scholar."

"Well, I do read books sometimes."

"It's all right. I'm glad you're still here."

It's the way she says *still* that gives him pause, makes him think of his brother's head in its velvet-lined box. What have they done to her? "I'm sorry I lied to you," he says.

"I'm sorry I stopped crying," she replies.

29

He dares to take her hand. It's cold, cold as the surrounding sea. "The old woman said, if you laugh in the rays of the rising sun, your curse will lift and

you'll cry like any other person."

"It's not a curse," she says, uncertain. "It's a blessing."

He wants to argue. Wants to tell her she's been used all her life. Wants to say he'd never do such a thing.

Even if it could bring his brothers back to life? His tongue falters. Still, he has to point out, "But you'd rather freeze to death than shed another tear."

30

She's never sure what does it: the Prince's words, the tone of his voice, or the bright sliver of sun cresting the horizon. She knows what she's supposed to do. Laugh, and undo what has defined every moment of her life for as long as she can remember. Laugh, and set herself free.

31

The Princess cried. As her tears spilled they turned to stone and fell into her lap. Morning light shone through the falling diamonds, covering her face with tiny rainbows.

32

The King awakes from fitful dreams. He swears he just heard the chime of precious gems, somewhere very far away. His fingers itch. Are there diamonds again? He goes back to his counting. Every stone accounted for, but then why is the floor so very wet?

"Fetch me my daughter," he shouts. The guards do not answer. Nobody's told him the Princess is gone.

33

At first he's jaw-dropped by the spectacle of it, the bright clear perfect jewels glittering down, one after the other. Then, for no more than an eye-blink, he thinks about how many houses could be rebuilt, how many walls repaired, how many bellies filled with the wealth from one of those diamonds.

Then he thinks of her father the King.

In sudden fury he leaps to his feet, grabs handfuls of diamonds from her lap, hurls them into the sea. When he tries to throw more, though, she takes his hands and shakes her head.

He ought to say it's not her he's angry at. Say that he tried to save her. Tell her she doesn't have to go back to her father. But before he can speak, she's turned his palm up and placed one of the awful diamonds in his hands. "This," she says, "will buy you house and land." She takes a second. "This will buy you chickens and goats, and seeds for a garden." She takes a third and stands, scattering leftover tears all around. "And this," she said, "will buy a fine white dress, and a ring for my hand, if you will have me."

The Prince gapes. Now she's got him crying, too, though his tears are only water and salt. "I would have you," he says, "more than all the jewels in the sea."

She laughs, and kisses him. Her cheeks flush. Her hands, her lips, burn like the sun. And though the tears in his hand and at her feet—*her* tears, given freely—remain hard as stone, they shine now with a warmer and a brighter light.

34

The jewel turns hot and wet in the King's hand, and then the treasury crashes down in one salty wave. The force drives the breath from his chest. He gasps once, breathes in his daughter's pain, chokes, goes still.

The flood tears the castle apart stone by stone. The servants flee. The guards drown. The radical scholar sits up in his floating bed, staring in amazement at the sea around him.

35

"I never trusted those new stones," the jeweler says, sorting through emeralds to find one that will fit the empty mount. "Always too perfect, too pure. Give me something mined out of the ground and cut by human hands. Something that won't turn on you."

The soldier's wife nods in polite agreement.

36

We still remember that celebration, long ago. The spices, the singing, the doves. It all seemed so beautiful, so full of promise. We didn't know, we tell ourselves, as we stroll along our new waterfront. We couldn't know. How could we?

And we don't mean to be ungrateful, but still: it's different now. Our new King and Queen live so far away, in their cottage by the sea, and their living room is hardly large enough for a proper procession. And it would be nice if we could go fishing in our new lake, and bring up something more than furniture and bones. It doesn't seem so much to ask, given everything.

37

The Queen sits in the back garden, tossing millet to the chickens, watching the ocean sparkle in sunlight. Her daughter sleeps against her chest. She's just a princess. The birth announcement specifically said *no gifts*.

The King's out front, feeding the goats. The Queen tries to keep a smiling face for him. Not the hardest task in the world. But there are still things that cause her pain, memories and mended bones. And she never wants to see that look on his face again.

The baby wakens and weeps salt tears. The Queen empties the last of the millet in a pile, grabs the broom, brushes her debris over the cliff and into the sea.

38

And diamonds still wash up on that beach to this day.

Sharon Mock's work has appeared in the October 2008 and December 2009 issues of *Realms of Fantasy*. She lives in Southern California.

Artists Gallery

by Karen Haber

Petar Meseldžija is a spellbinding storyteller whose images of dragons, dwarves, and other denizens of fantasy are painted with old-world traditional techniques tempered by an awareness of the contemporary scene. The Netherlands-based artist began his artistic journey in his native Serbia—then Yugoslavia—where comic books were the gateway drug to his art career.

Around the time he decided to leave his then-war-torn homeland for a safer harbor he also shifted his artistic focus, from comics to fine art. Once safely anchored in the Netherlands, he began an intense artistic journey that ultimately brought him full circle by utilizing the myths and traditions of his homeland in *The Legend of Steel Bashaw* (Flesk, 2010), a beautifully illustrated fairy tale. The book has been a revelation for both professional artists and fans of beautiful traditional fantastic illustration. Says master artist Gregory Manchess: "Whenever I've been lucky enough to stand in front of an original oil painting by Petar Meseldžija, I easily lose myself in the landscape of brilliant brushwork. An absolute master of pigment, Petar's work can weaken the knees of a professional and drop him right into that imaginative world by a mere stroke. He's just that good."

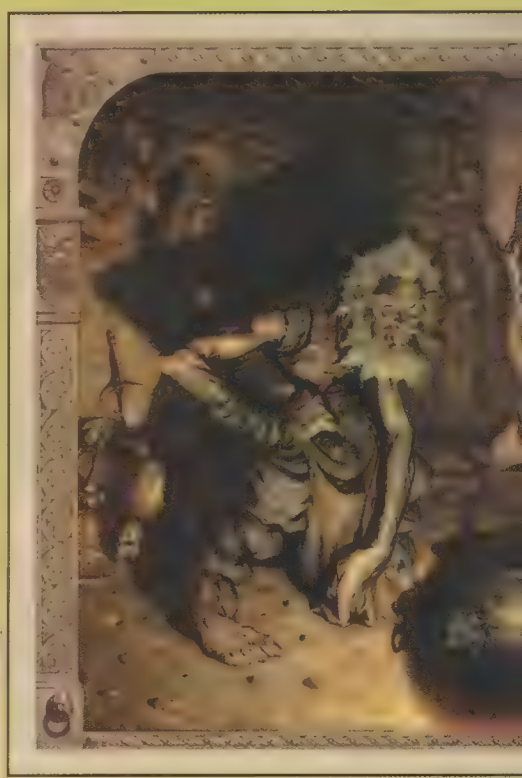
Among the many awards Petar has received for his work are the International Golden Pen of Belgrade (1994), the 59th World Science Fiction Convention Art Show Judges' Choice Award (2001), two Silver Awards, in *Spectrum: The Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art 4* and *10* respectively, and a Gold Award in *Spectrum 16*. In addition, his work was hailed by fans and fellow artists at IlluXCon 3, and has been blogged about in *Lines and Colors* by Charley Parker (http://www.linesandcolors.com/2010/09/30/the-legend-of-steel-bashaw-petar-meseldzija/) and *Muddy Colors* by Justin Gerard (http://muddycolors.blogspot.com/2010/11/most-mind-blowing-images-i-have-seen-in.html).

Giants - The Bull Fight
90 x 55 cm. oil on masonite

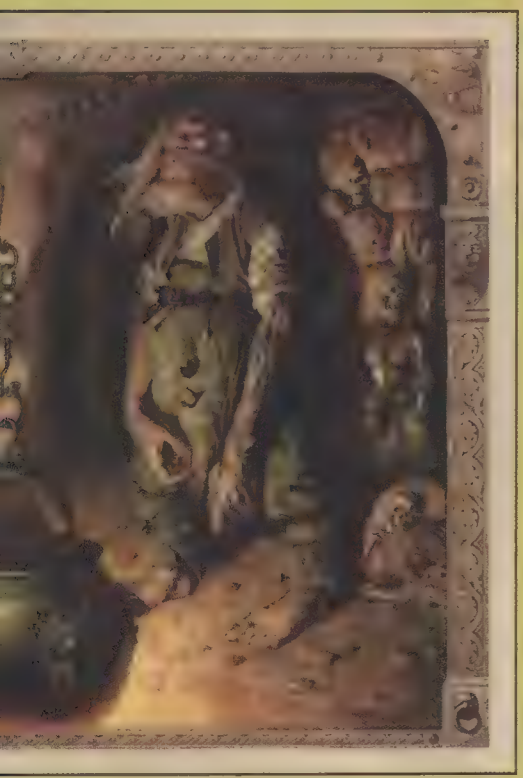
Opposite page: Gandalf
50 x 70 cm. oil on masonite.

Petar Meseldžija: Putting the Color in the Right Place

The Le
o
Steel B



egend
f
ashaw



The Dawn of the Day 93 x 90 cm, oil on masonite

Born in Novi Sad, Serbia, in 1965, he began his career in 1981, publishing the comic strip *Krampi*. This was followed by work on the European version of Tarzan comics. He graduated from the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad and, soon after, emigrated to the Netherlands, where he devoted himself to illustration and painting. Since that time his work has appeared on posters and greeting cards, and as book covers and interior illustrations for many international publishers and for Scholastic in the U.S. His original work can be found in the private collections in Serbia, the Netherlands, Germany, and the U.S.

The Legend of Steel Bashaw is Petar's adaptation of *Baš Čelik*, a traditional Serbian folktale about an enchanted dragon that he first heard as a boy. As do so many of the best folktales, this one involves a kidnapped princess, a heroic prince, enchantments, and redemption. Petar gives credit for his visual inspiration to art masters of the past, and Rembrandt in particular. "I live quite close to Amsterdam and the Rijksmuseum, where they have a significant collection of Rembrandt's paintings. I've spent countless hours looking at his magnificent work, analyzing his glorious technique. Gradually I learned to tune myself to his art and was able to 'hear' what he had to say to me."

Petar adds, "That brings us to the question: How are we to connect Rembrandt and *The Legend of Steel Bashaw*? How one connects a mighty elephant to a tiny mouse!" The artist says he kept the principles of Rembrandt's paintings in mind as he embarked upon his project. "Although I didn't adopt Rembrandt's working method, I kept in mind his treatment of light and glowing shadows, trying to achieve a similar effect by using my own approach to the technicalities of painting in oils. The first three paintings in *The Legend of Steel Bashaw* show the influence of Rembrandt's art."

The years-long process of writing and painting the book led Petar to draw from other sources of inspiration as well. "In order to add a certain archaic quality to the look of the art I started to dig into the medieval past of the ancient city of Novgorod," the artist recalls. "The beauty of the medieval Serbian monastic architecture and its frescos helped me infuse the book with spiritual symbolism and harmony."

He also cites the work of four artists—two Serbs and two Russians—as being deeply inspirational: Viktor Vasnetsov (1848–1926), Ivan Bilibin (1876–1942), Paja Jovanović (1859–1957), and Uroš Predić (1857–1953). Finally he notes: "A constant flow of inspiration came from Mother Nature. Nature helped me transport my mind to the archetypal level of humane exis-

Remembrance 50 x 70 cm, oil on canvas

On previous pages, 50-51: The Legend of Steel Bashaw, varying sizes, oil on masonite

tence, where all human beings, no matter what gender, race, or culture, come together and sit around the ancient fire of their common, divine origin."

Painting for His Life

Petar recalls, "I left my homeland with only a bag and a few original paintings, leaving twenty-six years of my life behind forever. It felt as if one life abruptly ended that day and the new one started. I came out of the train at the Amsterdam Central Station as a baby comes out of the mother's womb. Only, in my case there was nobody to welcome me to this new life."

Petar's adaptation to his new environment was difficult at first. "For the first few years I fought a battle of survival with my talent, my artistic skills—which were still developing—and my eagerness to stay in life and make something of it as my only weapons," he recalls.

"I take pride in the fact that, from the very beginning, I was able to earn my living by use of brushes and pencils," he says. "Of course, I can't forget the importance of luck—and the assistance of some good Dutch people. However, the assignments I did in those days were commercial ones, quite different from things I would normally do. But they provided me with the means for making a living—however meager—and gave me the opportunity to practice, learn, and to further develop my abilities."

Homesickness soon began to take its toll on the young artist. "After two years of very commercial work I started to feel the urge to do something just for myself. I was terribly homesick. Eventually, the solution presented itself: illustrate a Serbian folk tale." The result was *The Legend of Steel Bashaw*.

Petar happily makes art the old-fashioned way, which means he spends long hours at the easel, painting with traditional techniques, striving to imbue his work with timeless qualities. He is a champion of narrative illustration and dynamic brushwork, especially *impasto*, a demanding technique that involves thick applications of paint to the canvas. "If done properly, this gives the painting surface a quality of cultivated roughness, which invites the light to play on it, enhancing its magic," Petar says, adding, "When seen from close in, the painting looks quite abstract. But when a viewer moves back, all the strokes fall into place and the realistic forms appear.

"In order to properly describe my approach to illustration and painting I have to place it within the right context," he notes. "When compared to fine art painting, illustration as an art form is quite limited and even in some ways 'capped.'

Svjatogor 27 x 56 cm, oil on wooden panel

The reason for that is the very nature of it. The main purpose of the illustration is to illustrate the text lines, describing things in pictorial forms, while the main aim of fine art painting is to be suggestive and to imply the underlying content rather than describing what is on the surface."

He continues, "I combine fine art and illustration, first of all by trying to be suggestive rather then descriptive. This process of suggestiveness penetrates all levels of my work, starting from the choice not to illustrate the text lines exactly but rather what is between them; through use of the secondary compositional forms to emphasize the primary aspect of the composition; to the use of alla prima, an expressive brush work technique in order to imply a sense of dynamic movement and vitality in my paintings."

Steeped as he is in traditional painting techniques, Petar takes a dim view of developments within the art and illustration world over the last fifty years. "Generally speaking, during the second part of the twentieth century, illustration lost the connection with fine art and became a unique and independent art form. Superficiality crept in. The surface became more important than the content. The current computer technology revolution speeded up the process even more."

But he sees signs of change. "After the euphoric use of digital technology in illustration, especially for the last ten to fifteen years, there is now a rising interest in going back to basics. Many young artists, who were educated in digital image-making, are showing interest in classic techniques like oils. Apparently, they felt that the digital technology, although in many ways superb, wonderfully refreshing and new, was lacking something like three-dimensional, primal, human quality.

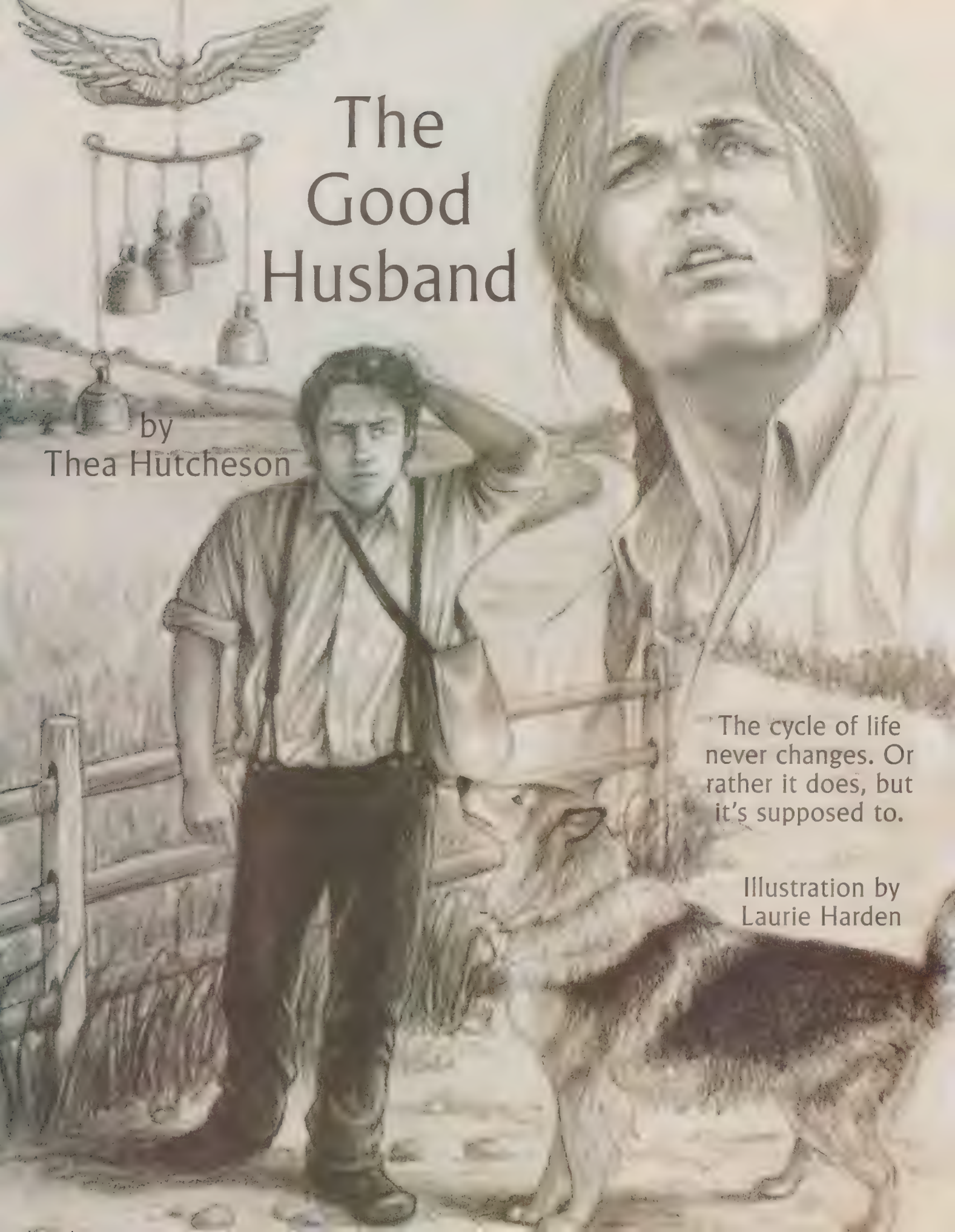
"As for me, I have always enjoyed the challenge of the wet paint, its fluidity and disobedience," he says. "Theoretically, my aim in painting is quite basic and simple. But it's extremely hard to achieve in practice! I simply try to put the right color on the right place and in the right manner."

To see more of Petar Meseldžija's artwork, visit his website and blog: petarmeseldzijaart.freehostia.com.

The Knight and the Dwarfs
32 x 58 cm, oil on masonite

The Good Husband

by
Thea Hutcheson



The cycle of life never changes. Or rather it does, but it's supposed to.

Illustration by
Laurie Harden

Keeler looked up from the struggling vegetable patch she'd been weeding and saw a man walking down the road holding a thin bag on a pole over his shoulder. To see a stranger was rare what with the war gone on for so long. He walked with a strong gait, swinging his free arm along at a good pace—no war injuries there then. That was even rarer. She was piqued, her blood ran a little faster and she straightened, brushing her skirt.

Looking carefully through the dust puffs rising from his feet, she saw he was young with a full beard in need of trimming, wearing a green cap, good journey-stained leather breeches, and a vest. As he came closer, she could see his shirt was coarse cotton, his boots were sturdy and worn. Not a uniform then.

He'd noticed her noticing him and, with a small smile, doffed his hat. Her neighbor wives sent him on his way to her in these hard times. This spoke even louder. She leaned the hoe against the fence, and used a corner of her apron to wipe the sweat from her face and clean the moist earth from her hands and fingernails. She finished by smoothing the graying hair under her hat.

Curta, her old dog, rushed out to investigate him. He petted her, scratching behind ears gone gray like her muzzle. He was looking at Keeler as he did so, appraising in the way of men and women. She let him, turning slightly to show off her still-handsome figure. His smile enlarged as he walked right up to the fence, and bowed. A full head of brown hair that could use cutting glinted in the morning sun.

"Good morning to you, ma'am, Jody at your service." She could see this Jody was very handsome, maybe twenty-five, and she smiled. She knew his type now—during every war there was a man, a Jody, willing to keep a war wife company, do a few chores for a place to sleep. But there was something else, the dreamer son of a comfortable family deeply wounded by the war. Her stab of fear at the depth of the wound quieted the quick hope, but didn't kill it.

"Good morning to you, Master Jody, I'm Keeler." She extended her hand and he took it gently, turning it over to lay his lips on her palm. His lips were soft and a thrill went through her. She didn't pull away. He nodded, well and good then, what he wanted to know.

He looked down at the scraggly new vegetation at her feet, the neat, if worn, cottage surrounded by a windbreak of elm trees encircled by pine trees, and, across the empty fields beyond, the barn.

"I see you could use a man's good hands. Will you feed me if I work?"

He'd noticed her noticing him and, with a small smile, doffed his hat.

"For how long?" She asked, looking up the road to Peck Hollow, wondering what her neighbor wives might know, understanding what they hoped. He shrugged.

"Is the war over then?" The look of pain in his face when he nodded shocked her and she resisted reaching out. She smiled back welcomingly instead and glanced down at her feet where the vegetable garden struggled to grow. Yes, he could mend the barn and get the crops into the ground before it was too late to matter this year.

"You have a nice place; a man could rest easy here."

The war had taken so many that those few who had come down the road these last years had been no loss to the fighting and little gain for her. Her neighbors had seen this one's sweet face and fine body and, whatever his personal trials, sent him down the road, their hopes that their good intentions would pay off come autumn clear.

Jody was handsome, too, for all that he smelled of the road. A lad who had never realized the potential of the man within him. All easily surmounted if he was willing and she and Creekside appealing enough. But the war wound was deep. Was it crippling? Keeler nodded slowly.

"I could use some help, that's no lie. Would you be wantin' some lunch first then, Jody?"

Flushed with his success and the prospects laid out before him he nodded, smiling, strong white teeth glinting in the mid-morning sun. He followed her to the gate and she knew he was watching her. It made her hips grow looser and age fell from her back, lifted her bosom up. Her fingers were graceful when they lifted the latch. She knew he wondered what wife skills they held.

She led him to the pump in the yard; he washed the dust from his face and neck. His skin was smooth, his lips heart-shaped. He had strong hands, lithe and calloused, no stranger then to the work he proposed. He drank three cups of water before he hung it back on its nail and turned to her.

The breeze freshened, carrying the scent of new lilacs and the tinkling from the chime on the eave. It was a fertility talisman, now corroded, from a culture older than this land's, brought by immigrants who'd made their way down the road here many years ago. Jody followed her gaze, grinning as he took in the bells hanging from the winged brass phallus.

She looked back to it. The phallus stood for the creative force, the wings a reminder of its sacred nature, yes, but it also embodied an egotistic belief in the strength of masculine energy as a catalyst for luck, a shield for Fortune.

Keeler took a breath of equal parts hope and fear and opened the door to a tidy one-room cottage. It was dim and cool inside. The generous room smelled of the herbs that hung from the rafters and the lamb stew that bubbled on the hearth. She poured ale into a tankard, unwrapped bread and cheese, laid them on the table, and gestured to Jody to sit at one of the two chairs. He did, watching as she ladled stew into a trencher.

His hand brushed hers slightly, accidentally, when he reached for the bread. She performed small chores while he ate, as much to keep busy as to let him look at what he stepped into.

"It's good, ma'am," he said. Keeler took the empty trencher and ladled more. Her bosom was at eye height when she put the trencher back on the table, and cut more bread. He took it all in with equal pleasure, belching

loudly when he finished.

"Thanks, ma'am. That was the best meal I can remember in a long while. Guess I'm ready to pay for it now, then."

"You're welcome, Jody." She breathed in and his male scent suffused her, making her entire body tingle. "No need to be so formal, though." Her voice cracked midway. "Please, call me Keeler."

There, she'd given him leave to be sure of his prospects. Jody nodded once to show her he understood, his eyes twinkling, a sly smile hiding behind his hand, as he wiped his mouth. He stood, suddenly tall in the house, filling the space.

"Let me see what needs to be done."

Keeler allowed herself to be a tiny bit pleased behind her skepticism, but she was happy to take the plates and tankard from the table and turn to the sink. She watched him through the window as he strode to the barn with strong, sure steps, hoping he was pleased at what he saw when he inspected the barn.

It was a fine land and many a knowing hand had been laid upon it. She smiled as she watched him remove his shirt. He was strong and his muscles rippled as he began to fork the manure into a pile. There was enough here to keep a man busy. Perhaps she could keep him satisfied and he would stay.

Jody worked hard, rarely stopping, and then only to drink the water she brought him and eat the cheese and bread she'd wrapped in a linen cloth. Sweat beaded on his smooth skin in the heat of the day.

"You've been without a man for some time, Keeler." He was looking around the barnyard, but that's not what he meant.

"Yes, the war...it's gone on, so long," she said, looking away from his blue eyes and the sudden pain there at the mention of the war.

"Then it's lucky for you that I've come down the road today." Enjoying the way the sun caressed his flesh, the golden hairs glinting in the light, she gave him the upper hand, to be confident, to be willing.

"Yes, I am lucky."

Now she did meet his eyes. His frank gaze on her face, her plump breasts, her wifely hands made her blush, and he smiled to see it. Fine prospects indeed.

"Well, thank you then for your kindness," he said generously. "I'll get back to work. Your tools are good too, made with love and care. They practically leap to the task. It makes the labor pleasurable."

He handed her back the cloth and tankard. His fingers were rough, but light on her fingers. A flush started across her face and spread across her cheeks and back. She turned, hiding her hot face.

"Yes, I am lucky."

"Thank you, Jody," she said, looking about the barnyard. The manure made a mound at the far end and chickens were busy at work, pecking in the newly uncovered ground. The sty that held the sow and her piglets had been repaired.

"I appreciate your fine work." She wanted to look at him, but would rather feel his eyes on her, her breath high in her chest, the swing of her hips as she walked away. The rest of the afternoon she hoed the garden, sweating in the sun.

He came to her as the sun dropped low into the west, his fingers crossing hers as he helped her steady the trellis for the new beans. His hands were filthy, with dirt under the nails. She wished she could wash them in her washbowl, filled with warm soapy water. She imagined the feel of them as her fingers slid over and around them, kneading the fine shape of them, drying them on a fresh linen towel. She remembered the smell of clean male flesh and the way it tasted against her tongue.

"You're quite red, Keeler. Perhaps you've had too much sun. It's still intense at this time of day."

He held her elbow, his hand to the inside, pressed against the soft mound of her breast, steering her to the yard. Jody seated her on the garden bench under the cherry tree and brought her water. She drank and some spilled out of the corner of her mouth. He watched it trail down her chin, her throat, to disappear into the cleft between her breasts. She dabbed herself with a kerchief as the breeze freshened again, carrying the scent of new roses and the tinkling of the chime.

"I'll heat water and you could have a bath after supper," she said. "If you like I'll shave you and cut your hair when you're finished."

"Thank you, Keeler. That's mighty generous of you." They went in, and she prepared dinner and started water, the same as lunch except that she had new greens from the garden. He took no opportunities to touch her, letting the knowledge that he could lie between them. They ate in silence.

When they were finished, the sun was setting and she lit the lamps. He helped her with the big wooden tub and watched while she got out soap and a rough towel. Keeler poured water into the tub and went out to shut the barn door, securing the coop when she was finished. A storm was brewing; the clouds came over the ridge to the west, black and full in the dusk.

When she returned she could see him through the window. He was rinsing; the water sluiced off his finely muscled body. He was burned from his day in the sun, wincing as he toweled off his shoulders. When he was dressed, she entered, pulling out the razor and shears from the cupboard. Jody sat silently while she lathered his face and shaved him close.

He had fine bones and a strong chin. She knew he was staring at her bosom and it made her breathe lightly, high in her chest so that her breasts lifted upward like an offering. Cropping his hair, she looked for nits, grooming him carefully, the old pleasure rising from the memory, the motions.

He placed his hand on Keeler's breast as she inspected him. She didn't move and Jody took that as permission, cupping it gently and pulling her toward him so that he could lay his smooth cheek between both breasts. She flushed, feeling his breath hot on her skin, mothering instincts touched by the simple gesture.

When he laid her on the bed, the storm broke with a great crack of thunder and rain poured down the roof. In the night lightning boomed directly over them and he woke screaming, then sobbed with his head on her breast like a child. She cuddled

him until they slept.

He took her again before dawn and the rain picked up, a steady, gentle rain that had stopped by the time the cock crowed. Keeler rose, and he followed when the fire blazed on the hearth. She made tea, cooked eggs scrambled with some of the sausage that hung overhead.

They ate in silence, letting the night lie between them. He looked at her differently now that she'd opened her home and her legs to him. He could simply eat and move on. She had seen the pain in this war-torn man. The capacity of men for their doings always astounded her.

Surprise sparked pleasantly in her when he said, "I slept well last night."

If that was well, she cringed to think what it was usually like.

"Well," he said suddenly nervous. "There's work enough without wasting the daylight."

His step was jaunty as he made his way toward the barn. She watched, noticing the tiny seed of hope amidst her fear as she brushed her burnished copper hair, twisting it into a bun which fit neatly under her hat. She went out into the yard. The breeze blew, gently tinkling the bells so that the shiny brass glinted in the morning sun.

She made her way through ankle-high grass and flowers in the yard to open the garden gate. The plants shed drops of water on the bottom of her dress as she went between the rows to hoe the ankle-high vegetables.

Keeler noticed the beans had begun twisting up the trellis amidst the lush greenery. When she took the basket of weeds down to the chickens and geese in the barnyard, Jody was coming up from the pasture.

"So, Keeler, the bull next door has broken the fence and serviced the cows. I only managed to chase him back over with Curta's help just now."

She smiled as she followed him into the yard and pumped a cup for him as he sat on the bench. He drank three cups while the dog lapped noisily from the trough and then flopped on the ground at his feet. The sun shone through the trees dappling Curta's black muzzle.

Keeler reached down to pet her shiny dark ears and the dog licked her hand, tongue lolling. The chime tinkled in the breeze and the brazen wings caught the light, sending sparks of sunlight throughout the yard. Jody looked to it and frowned. She watched him, wondering what he would do. But he only looked to her with a measured glance and handed her back the cup.

"Well, Keeler, I've had a good rest and there's seed in the barn. I'll set the plow on the horses and see if I can get a field ready to plant."

She wasn't sure then, wasn't sure that she shouldn't say no, there's other things more pressing, less long term, but she caught herself, seeing again the promise in those shoulders, the strength in his hands.

"Thank you, Jody. I appreciate it."

"I can tell," he said with a sideways glance at the chime as he stood and walked down to the barn. Curta followed at a trot.

She let it lie, knowing he would come to it in his own time, smiling as she went to work. She made soap and aromatic oils for sale to the folk at Peck Hollow. She had a reputation, for these, if not other things.

She took Jody meat, bread, and cheese for his lunch with a cold tankard of mint tea. He was in the field urging the horses on past a fence surrounding a small, neat cemetery. His shirt was off and he browned nicely in the sun. She liked the play of muscles under his glistening skin.

> "You're a spirit then, and this is your magic?"

The horses worked the plow well. They were heavily built blonde sorrels, broad, and large, with hooves like platters. The long, pale feathery hairs that fringed them and their ankles were now covered with balls of moist earth. She unhooked the horses when he took the food and followed her with one mare as she led its plow mate to the river under the trees to drink. Hobbling them, Keeler loosed them to graze while Jody sat on a log to eat.

"This is good cheese. Do you make it yourself?"

"Yes, from the nannies." Jody watched her closely and she knew he had chosen his time.

"There was no billy goat yesterday. I fed and watered them this morning. Today, he's in the pen as black as the devil and just as evil."

When she said nothing he shook his head. "I've eyes in my head, Keeler. I see the dog isn't gray this morning and chases the bull like she was a pup. I see the chimes have lost their tarnish, and the plants grow overnight."

She stood quietly, waiting.

"I see you're a maid this morning, having lost your matron wrinkles and gray hair in the night. What do you say?"

"What shall I say?"

"A witch then."

"I am as you see me; the land is as you see it."

Jody dropped his gaze first, but said, "Aye, a beautiful young woman who was approaching her cronehood yesterday. That says witch to me."

"A traveler once named me a land spirit. Creekside is my place. Together we are...fruitful."

He looked at her quizzically. "You're a spirit then, and this is your magic?"

"Magic? For me it's hunger for a hand on the land, on me, making, doing. I persist here; the potential of the land is my heart. Is that magic?"

He looked at her sideways, calculating, measuring. He was so young, so handsome, so confident as he began to understand what she offered. He was also very powerful at this moment because he realized he held her fortunes in his hands.

"You yearn for my hand on you?"

She couldn't whisper anything but "Yes," as she remembered what that hand could do.

"You want me to stay here so that I'll work the land?"

"Yes."

She knew what he'd ask next. She'd tell the truth because he'd been sent down the road to her from a war that had gone on so long that whole villages were full of nothing but children and grieving widows, and she couldn't hope for anything better than this.

"What will you offer?"

"What do you see?"

He hadn't shown a cruel streak; she could only hope that was the truth of him. He nodded and his puckish smile

pulled at the corner of his mouth. Finally, he laid down the linen cloth, and finished off the tea, glanced up at her, and pulled her down. She didn't resist as he kissed her hard and fumbled in her bodice. He took her there in the grass, rolling off to lie sweating beside her.

"So, will you become a child if I keep lying with you?" She smiled.

"No, I'll be as you see me."

"And the farm?"

"It prospers under your hand."

"Will I end up in the graveyard with the others?"

He looked across the way to the fence with its neat rows of headstones.

"All things die; it's the lot of living things."

"Are you living? Can you die?"

"I don't know. I wither without a hand, but I've always been here. At Creekside, my place."

She gazed at him steadily.

"Isn't it enough to work hard to be honestly rewarded?"

He met her eyes just as steadily.

"You'll reward me?"

Jody would brown from his labor and his arms were well muscled. Solemnly she nodded, adding, "And the land. For as long as you desire."

"Well," he said shyly, "you should know my name is really Adan." Keeler nodded, accepting this truth. He took her again, kneading her breasts hard, riding her harder, proving to himself the truth of her words and the lengths to which he could take her in her hunger for his hand. He kissed her deeply when he finished and she answered it.

He unhobbled one mare to lead her back to the plow. She was already hitched when Keeler followed him out from under the trees with the other. He smiled, his white teeth gleaming in his sun-browned face, pleased with the bargain he had made. She nodded back, hiding her hope and her fear behind it as she moved lightly through the field, her hips swaying under her dress.

* * * *

Summer solstice came and she walked him out among the fields. The air was thick with the smell of the creek down among the trees, the waist-high barley and chest-high corn, the ears forming as thick and long as his forearm.

She danced under the sickle moon and he laughed as he watched. He pulled her down beside him when she was finished and covered her. She breathed in their sweat and the lavender oil she had rubbed into her skin. He held her tightly when he finished. His arms were strong with all his work and very warm. Keeler nestled in.

"Will I end up in the graveyard with the others?"

"I'll have your child, Adan," she said into his chest, an offer of trust.

But he took it as expected, saying, "I should hope so as often as I get you."

"It'll be spring before it comes."

"Then I have time to make a cradle."

She took hope from that, kissing him hard on his full mouth. They watched the stars after that, pointing out constellations to each other. He fell asleep on her breast as she watched the sky's familiar slow, unending wheel until the moon set. She woke him and they walked back to the cottage, falling sleepily into bed.

The next morning she let him sleep while she did the morning chores, feeding the animals, shooing the rooster stalking about the barnyard like a tiny king. She moved among the goats, keeping a wary eye on the billy goat.

The chime tinkled in the morning breeze and she smiled at the bright flashes from the sun reflecting off it. She picked peas from the garden and adjusted the rabbit fence. Weeding carefully, she carried the basket down to empty it out among the ducks.

Curta, now pregnant, greeted her as she came back up to the house. She went into the kitchen and came out with the bowl of greens, rice, and lamb. The dog ate and then went to the trough to drink. She lay down under the trees watching Keeler, wagging her tail. She smiled at her.

She's a good bitch, Keeler thought, and has thrown many good puppies over the years. Between the generous harvest Adan had planted, her oils, and the coming pups, it amounted to a significant amount of money—had the war not taken it all. She wondered what there would be to barter for this fall.

* * * *

While their husbands sweated in the fields with Adan to bring the harvest in, her neighbor wives used these days as an excuse to come to Creekside.

They brought a potluck of favorite dishes, their children, and their wares. Keeler set out trestle tables to hold the food and smaller tables tucked into the shade to hold all the trade items. Eight barking puppies gamboled and tripped, following children as they ran on errands and curiosity. Keeler was kept busy enough with a stream of goodwives looking at the oils and soaps that she couldn't worry about Adan in the fields with the men.

The women puffed their bosoms, taking credit for sending "that 'un on down the road. He's a strong 'un, I thought, and just right for you. Turns out I was right; look at the harvest he's bringin' in! And look how well my yarn came out this year."

They all took turns adding their share to the offering they'd sent her and how well he'd turned out for them all.

"And her belly is round again," one commented as she sniffed oils and cakes of soap.

"Many years since that's happened."

The rest nodded wisely, some winking.

"Best slow down," another said, slyly stroking a puppy and Keeler's fear at once.

"At this rate he'll be used up by February and then what for the baby?"

"If he makes it that long," another old woman said, grinning.

Several women shushed her, shooting her angry looks, while making superstitious gestures.

"Or if some of the men don't spoil it for him."

Here a number of them exchanged significant looks.

"They'll kill their own children, not to mention the rest of us, for the

envy in their cocks," said another.

"How can they be so stupid?"

Keeler didn't answer, couldn't answer, as she studied these women's faces with their expectations and hopes and fears written so plain. They were the same as hers, and she consoled herself that it had been a good season and they brought a bountiful stock of items to trade.

The women clucked, shook their heads, and turned to bargaining. They made deals—a pup for a bolt of linen, thread, flannel, and scraps for a quilt for the baby; soaps for thread; aromatic oils to ease various ailments for sausages.

The day wore on and she heard all their stories about sending "Jody" on down the road; he must've stopped at every shop and holding along the way, accepted their high hopes and best wishes for the baby and for them all.

Keeler sold all the pups and most everything else. She was surrounded by some of the goods and had chits for the rest by the time the men came in the yard. Adan was driving the two mares, both newly pregnant, pulling the wagon piled high with the fruits of the fields.

He was wearing a fine linen shirt and new breeches of tanned goat hide. He'd made a wide-brimmed hat evenings while she sewed. For a moment the images were so crisp she could smell his scent, the linen, and leather he wore. He was a fine, strong man, now heavily muscled from the months of plowing, mending, and minding the farm. He'd worked hard these last five months and the land had rewarded him with the best she could remember in many years of remembering. She'd worked hard to please him as well and hoped he'd been happy.

He saw her watching him, stared at her, then tipped his hat. The gesture signaled something new. Her stomach didn't unknot. Someone shouted at him and he looked away, the moment was gone, and her heart was cold. After the initial meeting when he climbed down out of the wagon and they kissed, the rest of the evening seemed to blur with duties.

He didn't actually avoid her; he was just a very busy host. When the party was over, they were busy with their separate chores, her to clean up, him to put the animals to bed. Finally, they were together in the cottage, him sitting at the kitchen table looking around the room as if he'd never seen it, her doing small chores to avoid sitting down and what that might provoke.

She began her bedtime ablutions and he spoke.

"You're quite a figure in these parts. I didn't understand how far you held sway."

"You didn't think it through. I told you, I've always been here. I require a man's hand upon me, the land rewards that hand, as do I. The people at Peck Hollow are the closest to Creekside. Of course I have known them. All the years and all the relationships have created a quilt of many colors, made from many stories and many outcomes. Not all are pretty, shapely, or happy."

He frowned. She hadn't meant to scold him, but it was too late now. He was looking for a reason and she had given him one.

"This isn't about rewards," he said. "You're sucking the life out of me and I'll join the others in the little cemetery beside the field. How many others are out there?"

The land and I belong together.

She pictured the neat fenced-in plots, all the husbands and children, lives played out under the wheeling sky, over and over, remembered earlier houses, and the cave up in the hills, those husbands and their children scattered in the other plots and other corners of Creekside, some two hundred and fifty generations.

She shook her head and he took it for obstinacy.

"Witch. This is all glamour."

This was going all wrong. Fear and frustration rose up, resources scattered. There was only the simple equation of Keeler's existence.

"It's a marriage men and the land make between them," she said. "The land is a hard mistress and the world harsher still. Men have known it since they first chose to husband it. They work it, plow it, seed it, harvest it, and in return for that care she ripens under their hands, and the animals they put upon it grow and prosper."

She looked at Adan. "I am what you see. The land and I belong together. I'm your helpmeet for the work. It's you that make us what we are, what we become, and that's what trickles down to Peck Hollow. They have tied themselves to Creekside as surely as you promised yourself to me.

"It's not me that sucks the life from you; it's the labor you make for the mistress under your hand. And such labor. Look at what you brought by your hand, a harvest that has not been seen in many generations."

He shifted under the praise, but he was still defiant, still looking for reasons.

"But you deceived me."

"How have I deceived you? I answered all your questions honestly; I told who I am and what I need. You offered your service to me. You've seen what's come of that."

He would not be appeased by his success and she felt defeat settling in.

"Nonetheless," he said. "My youth fades too fast. Bits of my life have been sucked away for you and what you call your farm."

She wanted to growl in frustration. "It's your hand, you put it to hard work. And the land obeys it with gladness; it's blossomed more than I have seen in longer than I can remember. It loves you as her good husband. Husband your hand, Adan, so the land does not rule your life."

She might have said it nicer; it was galling to be blamed for his excesses, the vanity of his youth and strengths, and worse, his inexperience.

"And you?"

She had only the truth and she offered it.

"I wouldn't've welcomed you if I hadn't seen the passion in you. Your seed couldn't have quickened in me if there was no return of my feelings. Don't you believe the last five months, Husband? Do you believe in the love I've given you, and the moments we've made between us?"

"I just won't have my youth and my life stolen for nothing."

She stared at him, trying not to let her exasperation come through her voice.

"Do you believe they've been stolen? Do you believe that this is nothing?" She gestured to her belly, to the cradle, to the wagon outside, waiting to be driven to market.

He looked at her, brow drawn tightly, eyes narrowed, remembering, weighing, looking into the future. She knew he understood the stakes completely now and watched him decide; the potential in him couldn't take root. Her hopes were ashes and her fear was breached by sudden anger.

"Will you forswear the land and me then?"

He was like some wild little animal caught between ego and truth.

Finally, forced to speak, he said, "I can't be with you, this is not what I thought..."

So his wounds were too great after all.

"Creekside and I will both weep for you as we wither," she said bitterly.

Adan was taken aback then, but couldn't change his stance, and realizing what came next, said, "Then there's no reason to stay."

He grabbed his jacket and turned, strong and sturdy, pulling the door open, striding out, and slamming it behind him. She heard him roughly command Curta: "Stay."

Keeler followed him out, apron at her mouth to stifle any outcry, one hand lifted helplessly as he strode off. She watched until she could see him no more. Keeler sat on the bench in the still evening. Finally, a breath of air soughed through the yard and the chime tinkled. She stood, pulled a branch off the cherry tree above her, walked over to it, and she beat the winged phallus until it fell to the ground. She flung the branch down on top of it, went inside, and closed the door.

Wearily, she looked around the cottage. Adan's things were still here. He'd left the same way he came. The cradle sat in the corner where he'd been working on it evenings after dinner. She undressed. Going to bed she saw Adan's clothes upon the peg on the headboard. One hand reflexively cupped her belly, the other one stroked his clothes. Swallowing useless, bitter tears she climbed into the bed. She lay in his accustomed spot, smelling him in the rough sheets, remembering the life they'd made and the moments of joy they shared.

All was lost—the horses, the goats, everything ruined because of the jealous spite of old men and the pride of one young man. It was late before she fell asleep. In the morning she rose to go out and weed the garden and care for the animals.

"I escaped the war."

A young man came from Peck Hollow to see about the wagon when it didn't appear in the village. He took Adan's departure with good manners, but made it clear he would be happy to court her and Keeler smiled at him, absently giving him leave to continue next year, when he would have reached his majority.

She lost the baby that night during a heavy fall rain that turned to snow in the night. She wrapped Adan's tiny son in a blanket and laid him to rest right before the ground froze. Keeler spent time on creek banks looking until she found the perfect stone, round, vaguely egg-shaped. Then she hit it against a boulder until it broke. She laid the pieces at the head of the tiny mound and stood quietly.

Then she looked out over Creekside until chores made her leave. The days went their way, one following the other. She plodded dully after them, feeling less and less of Adan in the workings of the day, the rhythms of the farm.

One morning she went out and the billy goat was dead. The nannies were crowded to the far side of the pen, bleating.

"I know, dears. I'll get him out."

She pulled the body from the pen and dragged the carcass to the barnyard, where she hoisted it up and butchered it. Blood-spattered, she packed the smokehouse and got the fire going. She went to wash up, but made it no further than the bench where she collapsed beside it, weeping.

Curta came to nudge her with her nose, and whine. When she realized that Keeler wouldn't touch her, she lay down and pushed her muzzle under Keeler's arm.

Suddenly Curta pulled free and ran through the wind break. Keeler turned, her heart in her mouth, anger clenched in her fists. Adan came walking through the gap.

"I hated the billy goat too, but isn't it a waste to kill it? How do you expect to get kids next spring?"

Adan held his hat in his hands. His linen shirt was filthy and his breeches were stained. He had a scraggly beard and looked much the same as the day he'd come up the road. He realized his error or saw her face and tried to cover with the boyish smile he had.

Keeler did not feel generous. She couldn't be.

"You have stricken my spring a mortal blow, sir." He looked down, flushing.

"Then you've come for your things. I won't stop you."

"Keeler," he began, but she cut him off.

"There's no need. You made yourself clear that night."

"I was wrong," he whispered.

She looked at him. He still couldn't look at her. His hat was completely twisted in his hands.

"I escaped the war," he said softly, and paused.

"My life and limbs intact, while my brother was shot right next to me, and died writhing with his guts falling out on the ground." He had to collect himself before he went on.

"We'd promised we'd protect each other. Every day, you get up knowing that you could die, but never believing it. The bullet, the ball, will always hit someone else. Except that day. That day it hit him. It hit him because he was pushing me out of the way.

"It should have been me rolling around on the ground at Appomattox. He screamed and cried, then finally begged me. It wasn't so much of an adventure then. But I had to finish him, you see, because he begged me. Afterward I ran. But he still screamed every night in my dreams."

He looked down at the ground.

"Life on the road isn't comfortable all the time," he said, not looking at her.

"But it's easy if you know how. You

hunt when you're hungry, travel when you must, and carry what you can. It's free; you're beholden to no one for nothing. You tack with the wind and go where it blows you. It's always an adventure; every day there could be something over the next hill. I wasn't going anywhere, except away from the war, when I saw you.

"My brother was silent since that first night. He hasn't stopped since I left you."

Adan looked up at her.

"See, I saw you, and Jody came out of my mouth when I introduced myself. Then I saw who you were and what you wanted."

He couldn't hold her gaze and looked at his feet again.

"And it wasn't so much that I believed what the men said. They made me realize I'd promised to take care of you, with no more guarantee of success than I'd had with my brother. I couldn't bear for you to suffer because I wasn't able to forestall disaster and there's no way I could cover everything, every moment. And so I left, afraid that I would fail. And I failed you anyway."

Keeler would have spoken, but he gestured sharply.

"The free life of the road, beholden to no one for anything, is as much of a gamble and doesn't compare to the warm light of lamps, the smell of your oils, the comfort of your bed."

Now she did speak. "Life is always a gamble, Adan. That's why it's better to have two to do the work. That's the for better or for worse part."

"For better or worse with a spirit who cooks up remedies for childbirth, pain, ills of the body. How do I know there isn't a love spell just for Adan and that's why I came back?"

The ghost of that sly smile came back. She shook her head, unsure whether he joked or not. She didn't answer his smile; there must be only the truth and his understanding of it.

"There's no magic but what you wove between you and the land you husbanded. The only bewitching is the same as between any man and woman who work for the same reward, lying down together at the end of the day.

"I weave no spells, see no future, except that the land suffers without a husband."

He met her eyes, and looked down. Summoning his courage he looked up and met her gaze steadily.

"I was afraid, but out there in the woods, too wet for fire, I thought about you in your warm cottage, how you lived there all those years and that made me ashamed that I was afraid to strive with you for my one poor lifetime."

He looked down for a long time. Keeler saw his throat work. He mastered himself.

"I broke my word, and I'll go if you say, but I want a life here at Creekside and the warmth of your love, Keeler. I say I'll stay if you'll have me, Wife, and I will strive to honor you and Creekside. And many years from now you can lay me to rest over the hill with the others."

He paused, unsure what to say next or what to do, but still looking at her. Keeler thought about it, watching him watch her, waiting for her answer. She could deny him; he had foresworn her, left her to fend for herself with his child in her belly. The war was over and other men would come down the road now.

> "It should have been me rolling around on the ground at Appomattox."

She wondered how many would be whole in body and full of the dreams that would make Creekside bloom. Who was to say there was a better man on the way? Who was to say that this young man, earnest and now chagrined, would not be able to shoulder the burden and husband his responsibilities to the benefit of them both?

It was the great unknown she had always faced and she faced it straight on with hope and fear dancing together in her heart, the same as it always had. She did smile then, and he smiled back, at first uncertain, then with hopeful pleasure. She nodded, accepting his apology and his possession of her, of Creekside, because she couldn't do otherwise and because, in truth, she wanted him very much.

His face wreathed in smiles.

"Then there it is. I best get back to work to provide for our child." She shook her head.

"There is no child," she said, rubbing her empty belly.

He looked at her confused.

"You foreswore me," she said, frowning. "I warned you I had to be certain to have your child."

He looked at her belly now, for the first time, and his face was that of a man punched in the gut. How had he not expected this? Keeler watched the war within him, noting again how strong and muscular he was, his sure and willing hands.

Finally, he stood straight and looked at her steadily.

"I'll get back to work and you'll have no reason to be uncertain again, Keeler."

She did smile then, and he smiled back, more certain this time.

"Would you want lunch first then, Adan, and a bath and clean clothes?"

"Yes, lunch, please. The soldiers going home cleaned out the woods south of here as they passed. I haven't eaten so well these last days," he added ruefully.

"But I'll wait on the bath until I've finished the day."

As they walked across the yard, he went to the chime, picked it up, considered it, and then Keeler. She dropped her eyes, which told him what he wanted to know. He wiped the mud from it, exposing the new blight of green tarnish. It tinkled merrily when he rehung it from its hook, and it rocked gaily in the morning breeze. Adan put his arm around Keeler before he opened the door for her and gestured her into the house.

Thea Hutcheson lives and writes in a large house full of an understanding partner, four semi-feral cats, and about a thousand books, situated in an economically depressed, unscenic, nearly historic small city in Colorado. When she's not working diligently as a planning commissioner to change that situation, she's a factotum. She wants to thank Gardner Dozois for his offhand comment, made at one of the Lincoln City, Oregon, workshops that sparked this story. Visit her at: www.theahutcheson.com.

The Equation

by Patrick Samphire

Illustration by Tony Shasteen

Most people strive to be rational and logical.
Perhaps more people should do otherwise.

"Oh. My. God!"

I'm standing in the Fire House Café, ordering a pot of tea—Sencha, one teaspoon, steep for three minutes—when the voice speaks right behind me.

I turn and she's standing there. Rachel Clay.

I'd be lying if I didn't say my heart stopped for just a second.

I haven't seen Rachel for eleven years. When we were sixteen, we were in Miss Haversham's science class at school. Rachel was bright, top of the class, small, cute, with blonde hair that was never really under control. We shared a kiss one night on the way home and danced together in the moonlight. What can I say? It was 1999. It was the best kiss of my life.

I left school soon after, and we never met again.

Now here she is, right behind me. I didn't think it would be such a shock, so visceral. If she was cute when she was sixteen, she's as hot as fire right now. She's wearing geek glasses, but she still hasn't got that hair under control.

I'm too dumbstruck to say anything, so it's a good thing she just keeps on going.

"Cameron Everett. Oh, my God. I was standing there in line and I saw you and I thought it can't be but... Hi."

She's blushing now. God, I used to get so turned on when she blushed.

Looks like she hasn't lost that magic.

I hurriedly turn away and scoop up my tea.

"Hi," I say. Original. "Look, can I get you a drink?"

* * * *

We find a table upstairs, away from everyone else, almost enveloped by an overgrown potted plant. I like to be close to living things. I sink back into the soft chair and look up at Rachel.

"So, do you keep in touch with anyone else?" I ask, more for something to say than because I'm interested. I never wanted to keep in touch with anyone from school. Except Rachel, that is, and I didn't have the nerve for that back then.

Her answer knocks me back for the second time today. "Everyone," she says.

"Everyone?" I say. "Everyone in our class?"

She looks at the table, as though there's something interesting written there. "Yeah. Everyone except you." She fires a little, nervous glance.

I don't know what to say. "Okay" fills the gap.

"You disappeared," she says. "I wanted to, but..."

"It's okay," I say. "I had...things to do. Like in the song."

"The song?"

"'Free Bird.'"

She looks puzzled.

"Don't worry about it," I say. I played that song to her on the night we kissed, when we were sixteen and the moonlight was shining down and I'd just discovered Lynyrd Skynyrd. Guess it didn't make the same impact on her. Maybe I should have played her some Thin Lizzy instead. "So," I say. "What are you doing these days? Are you married? Kids?"

She blushes again. "Me?"

I can't help but feel a slight flush of warmth, but whether it's from her blush or the fact that she's not married, I'm not sure.

"How about work? You must have gone to Uni, right?"

She nods. Then she glances around. No one is close enough to hear, but she leans forward and drops her voice anyway.

"I'm working for Miss Haversham now."

I act surprised. "Miss Haversham? Our science teacher? Doing what?"

"Oh, computers," she says vaguely.

I grin. "Well, that figures. Science was always your favourite subject. Computers are the new science, right?"

She laughs. Her fingers brush back her loose hair. It's the same nervous gesture I remember from that night we kissed. I experience the overwhelming urge to lean forward and kiss her again. Somehow, I control myself.

But she's not finished with the shocks for the night.

"We all work for Miss Haversham."

That one does hit me with genuine surprise. "Excuse me?" I say.

"All our class. Well, except you." She glances around again. "I shouldn't be telling you this."

"Except me again, huh?" I grin, but it feels lopsided. I feel obscurely offended that I'm the only one not to be offered a job. Not that I'd work for Miss Haversham in a million years, but it's the principle of the thing. "What on Earth does she want everyone for? John Peters too? He could hardly tie his shoelaces."

I should have known this. I thought I knew enough. For the first time today, I feel nervous.

"There's stuff he can do," Rachel says.

"So, what, is Miss Haversham running the school now?"

"Something like that."

Something like that. It's one way to put it.

"Huh. She never really liked me, I guess," I say.

"It was the leather jacket," Rachel says.

"This?" I still have the jacket. I'm still wearing it. It fits better now than it did when I found it in the market twelve years ago. "What, is she some kind of vegetarian or something?"

"No. It's just..." Rachel shakes her head. "She likes smart. You never did smart. Look, can we talk about something else?"

"Sure, sure," I say, then, "What, even Harriet Martin?"

"Cam..."

"Sorry. So you're all working for Miss Haversham. A bit weird, but..."

"And how about you? What have you been up to?" She cups her hands around her latte, and leans forward, eyes fixed on me.

"I travelled around a bit," I say. "Peru. Georgia. Zimbabwe. Tibet. Kashmir. The Balkans. You know."

"Wow," she says, and she sounds impressed. "Doing what?"

"This and that," I say. Not a lot of details, admittedly, but details are ex-

actly what she's not getting. Not one of Miss Haversham's brood. She'll figure out what she needs to know soon enough. I'm hardly going to help her along.

"Sounds fun."

I shrug. "It's been interesting."

"I've thought about you," Rachel says. "From time to time. We had...a good time."

I grin, and it's genuine. "Yeah. We did."

She pulls out a pen and starts doodling on a napkin, not really watching what she's doing. I can't see what she's drawing. Her hand is in the way.

"So, do you still live here?" I say. "In Bristol?"

"Yeah. I've got a little flat in Clifton. It's not much, but it's cosy. Maybe sometime..." She doesn't finish the sentence.

"Miss Haversham must pay well," I say, not answering the unspoken question. "I should have got into computers."

There are other people in the café, at other tables, talking and laughing, but I scarcely notice them. Normally I notice everything.

"It's never too late to learn," Rachel says. "I could give you some pointers. You'd be good at it."

"I don't think so," I say, smiling to show it's not a rejection. "I've got wandering feet." I whistle a couple of notes from "Free Bird."

She frowns, but she still doesn't get it.

"And you wandered back this way," she says. "Any reason?"

I shrug. "Curious, I guess. I haven't been back here for years."

"Been past the old school yet?" I'd forgotten how intense her eyes could be, even behind her glasses.

"Not yet," I say.

"I could show you."

"Is that where you work?" As though I don't know.

"No," she says. "Miss Haversham's got her own place now."

"Sounds interesting," I say.

She sighs, and her pen stills on the napkin for a moment.

"We know who you are, Cam," she says.

Ah.

I guess we're done dancing.

She must know almost all she needs to. She wouldn't let on otherwise. She's quick. I shouldn't be surprised.

For a moment, I'm hit by a feeling of inexpressible sadness. This has been good. It was like these last eleven years never happened, like we were back in the moonlight, just before we kissed, standing only a centimetre away from each other, the air between us electric and frightening and raging with teenage desire.

"Why?" Rachel says, leaning forwards, her face genuinely anguished. "Why would you do it, Cam? They call you 'Dark Angel,' you know. You were never cut out to be a villain."

"Is that what you think I am?" I say, hurt, even though she could hardly think anything else if she's with Miss Haversham. "A villain?"

"What are you then?"

"I'm a fucking hero."

She winces. I'd forgotten she hated swearing.

When she speaks again, her expression is more distant, more...professional. I don't like it. If I've made the wrong move, this could all be over.

"You were never cut out to be a villain."

"The world's all grown up now, Cam," she says. "You're not sixteen with Che posters all over your wall. Everything's changed."

"Has it?"

"Yes. I've heard about you. I've heard what you've been doing. They say you were there during a dozen bloodbaths." Her hand clenches into a white fist. "I know you wanted to save the world, but all you're doing is getting people killed. Maybe you don't mean to, but it's what happens. Those places you go, those trouble spots, you make them worse." She's earnest, flushed, leaning towards me. Her eyes are oak-brown behind her glasses. "There are other ways of saving the world, Cam. Our ways. Ways that work. It's time to come in from the cold."

I laugh. "Do people actually say that?"

"I'm serious!"

"I know." I wish she wasn't. She didn't used to be. Back then, back when we were sixteen and in the moonlight, I loved Rachel Clay.

"Your coffee's getting cold," I say. I lean forwards and touch her cup. A spark jumps from my fingertip to the cup, and the next moment, her coffee is steaming again.

It's not much, but she yelps and jumps back. "Don't do that!"

I shrug. "Why not?"

"It's *wrong*."

"It's just coffee," I say. "I promise."

Slowly, she picks it up and takes a sip. "It's good," she says, reluctantly.

"Nothing to do with me," I say. "They make good coffee here."

"Cam," Rachel says, unwilling to let go, "we're doing important work. You could be part of that. Miss Haversham won't hold grudges. She can give you a clean slate. That's what she always used to say in class, remember? We start with a clean slate?"

I'm shaking my head before she finishes.

"You said those places I go to are trouble spots, and I know that's how Miss Haversham sees them, but they're not. They're places where people haven't forgotten their culture and traditions." I hold her gaze. I can't afford to lose her now. "There's still magic in those places. Real magic. People like Miss Haversham can't stand it. They want to crush it and make it as though it's never been. Are you surprised there's conflict? It's the Miss Havershams of this world who are to blame, not me."

This time, Rachel is the one shaking her head.

"You're wrong. We just want peace. Those superstitions, those legends, those myths, they're what make people hate each other." She's forgotten her coffee again. "They're not worth it. All Miss Haversham wants to do—all any of us want to do—is make people see the world in a rational light. Can't you see that if people give up on those myths, they won't have any reason to fight anymore? They'll have better

There's magic in hate and love and passion, in awe and fear, in a baby crying, in an old man's last breath.

lives. Happier lives." She draws a breath. "You could help us."

She's intent, determined, passionate, focused on me, but the whole time her pen is still rushing across the napkin.

"The world used to be different, you know," I say.

I ease back, feeling the leaves of the potted plant brush against the nape of my neck. I can taste the energy in them, still wild, but hidden, almost crushed.

"Magic used to be everywhere," I say. "In the streams and the woods and the villages. Everyone was full of it. Every*thing* was full of it. Gods cracked the sky with thunder. Wild spirits hid in the bark of trees. When someone spoke, magic flowed. Every myth and fairy tale was alive. Glance around, and it was glittering, wild and untamed. Until the Miss Havershams killed it, made it just stories for children, to be laughed at and forgotten."

"Sometimes..." Rachel starts, her voice quiet. "Sometimes there's a price for peace."

Right on cue, "Free Bird" starts playing over the café's speakers. I hum along to the first few bars. This time, now that it's playing, Rachel recognises it. Her eyes widen.

I chose this café for a reason. Alex Cornwell, the owner, is a friend of mine. I don't have many of those. He knows the truth.

"That time," I say, "in the moonlight, when we danced and kissed. That was the first time I felt magic. You felt it too. I *felt* you feel it."

"They'll never let you walk out of here alive," Rachel whispers, and there are genuine tears in her eyes. "Not if you don't come in with me. Not even you can escape this one, Cam."

"I can if you let me," I say.

"What?"

"Don't do it," I say. I lay a finger on the hand holding her pen. It's not enough to stop her if she doesn't want me to, just enough to make her pause.

I know what she's been doing here. She's been watching. She's been learning me, understanding my magic, working it out, seeing how it all fits together. And she's been writing it down. The cold equation.

Magic can't survive logic. It can't survive explanations. Once it's understood, it's not magic anymore. It's dead. That's how people like Miss Haversham have killed magic, by writing it down and turning it into something that makes sense and can be understood. They've turned it all into numbers and logic. Into cold, hard equations. One piece of magic at a time, they've written it down, until almost all of it has gone.

Rachel has been creating my own cold equation, the one that will rob me of magic and make me ordinary, turn me into another Miss Haversham.

"Miss Haversham chose you because you knew me," I say.

Rachel shakes her head. "I volunteered."

I smile. Over the speakers, that blistering guitar solo kicks in.

"Miss Haversham never knew, did she?" I say. "You didn't tell her that you tasted magic that one night."

"No," Rachel whispers.

"She never found out that magic was within you."

"No."

"She never wrote down your cold equation. She never knew she had to."

"No." I can scarcely hear her now.

"From the moment you showed me magic that first time," I say, "I've travelled the world, gathering every shard I could find, all those last fragments hidden out of sight of the rational world." There's magic in hate and love and passion, in awe and fear, in a baby crying, in an old man's last breath. It hides in the rawness of the world. Little, lost fragments, holding on. Without it, there's nothing. No beauty, no music, nothing to truly live for. "I can bring magic back to the world," I say. "I'm ready. But I can't do it alone. I need you, Rachel." She was my source, the core on which all the rest has grown.

With a twist of my fingers and a couple of words muttered under my breath, I cast a cantrip. Something I learned in a small Siberian village that the rest of the world had forgotten, an unveiling charm. It spreads out, unnoticed, passing like a sigh through the walls of the café.

The charm shows them to me. Two hunched in the doorway of the Starbucks opposite, trying to keep out of the cold wind. Another couple in an empty office above the Starbucks, peering down their rifle sights. Three of them out the back, in the shelter of the bins. Others mingling with the shopping crowds, trying to look inconspicuous. Even a few in the café downstairs, pretending to read papers. The whole of Miss Haversham's science class is there.

For a time, when I was sixteen, I could have been one of them.

The cantrip shows me Miss Haversham too, cold, featureless, white ice against the wintry day, not trying to hide. They are all waiting for that one last stroke of Rachel's pen that will finish the cold equation.

That cantrip may be the last magic I ever do.

"I can bring back the moonlight," I say. "With you."

For a moment, the world waits, not breathing.

Then, slowly, without looking at me, Rachel's hand closes over the napkin, scrunching it up. She lifts it and drops the cold equation into the still warm coffee.

She takes my hand, tears in her eyes.

I open a door in the air. There's moonlight behind it.

We step through, leaving the music behind us, playing to our empty table.

Patrick Samphire lives in Wales, UK, with his wife, writer Stephanie Burgis, their son, and their dog. When he's not writing, he works as a freelance web designer. His short stories have previously appeared in *Realms of Fantasy, Interzone, Strange Horizons,* and the *Year's Best Fantasy,* among other places. You can read all his previously published stories on his website: www.patricksamphire.com.

LOYALTY IS NOT OFTEN REWARDED
APPROPRIATELY. TREACHERY OFTEN IS.
IERI
© 2011

WREATHED IN WISTERIA, DRAPED IN IVY

BY EUAN HARVEY ILLUSTRATION BY DAVE LERI

Manuscript 756.56a: Correspondence between Cheng Heng and unnamed Han court official (pr. Zheng Chao—d. 133 B.C.E.). Portions of original manuscript excised by Thomas Francis Wade following a dinner engagement with an unknown Chinese male in Beijing in 1864.

Most probable recipient of original manuscript was Zheng Chao, assassinated in 135 B.C.E. The peculiar circumstances of the assassination are related in Sima Qian's *Histories*.

[Manuscript begins]

Esteemed Noble Lord,

I, who am beneath your pavilion, address you, O Princely Lord.

This poorly formed manuscript contains the conclusions of my investigation of Baron Nie of Minyue.

Before I present my conclusions, I wish to express my gratitude for what you have done for me, the insignificant one. Your boundless generosity in lessening my punishment from death to castration for publicly defending General Yang enabled me, the low one, to continue to serve you, O Noble Lord. And as I have served the noble lord faithfully, I crave from you the answer to a question. It is almost unworthy of consideration by one so exalted.

Why did you send my son to the headsman?

The news of his death has cut me, deeper even than the knife which took that which made me a man. I thought I had discovered the bright and secret heart of pain, but I know now that I was wrong.

You may perhaps be wondering, Noble Lord, how it is that I am writing to you. Your assassins found me, Noble Lord. You chose well; they stole upon me like old age—unnoticed until it is too late. They found me as I was bathing. Their swords pierced me deeply, and the bath water ran crimson with my blood.

And yet here I kneel in the best room of an inn on the Chang'an road, writing this report to you, O Princely Lord.

It is a mystery, is it not?

If I open my robe, I can look down and see the deep wounds from the assassins' blades. They disfigure my chest and stomach, gaping open like mouths. There is a certain symmetry there: new cuts above, an old cut below. But while the cut between my legs bled scarlet for days, these new cuts bleed not. The flesh is pale inside; my blood now mingles with the waters of the Chang Jiang.

> IT WAS UNNATURAL.

And yet my hands move. Life is in me; I hear the shrill of the crickets outside in the moonlight, I feel the hairs on the back of my arm stir as I reach for the ink block. I do not breathe, nor does my heart beat—but I live.

It is a violation of the natural order. I swim upstream, against the Tao. But as there is symmetry in my wounds, so too is there symmetry in this. A pattern of disharmony: a father lives while his son dies, a man without that which makes him a man, loyal service rewarded with treachery, assassins strike deep but their man yet kneels and writes.

But these matters properly belong to the conclusions of my report, and not the beginning.

So let me, the uneducated one, return to Baron Nie and the Duke of Shu, and if the noble lord recognizes yet more symmetries, then that is perhaps not surprising—as the Baron's story, like my own, is a tale of the natural order, of how the invisible hand of the Tao rules the lives of all men, whether they will it or no.

The Baron's Tale

Baron Nie reined in his mount at the top of the pass and looked down on the narrow valley beyond. In this, the plum month, the valley should have been a medley of green: moss-green bamboo, the jade of maple, the brilliant emerald of new rice.

But the dragon had still not exhaled, and the drought had leached the jade from the mountains, leaving behind only umber and ivory. Golden leaves lay in drifts around the feet of trees, which raised naked branches to Heaven, as if beseeching Ying Long's mercy. Lower down the slopes, a few bleached squares of rice paddies lay in sinuous lines around the slope of the hill; their course mirrored by the dusty rocks of the dried-out riverbed.

It was unnatural. As men should revere their fathers, as their children should revere them in turn, so too should rain fall in the plum month.

Baron Nie was concerned. And not solely because of the lack of rain—the parting words of the Duke of Shu would not leave his mind. "Decide well," the Duke had said, and Baron Nie knew what that meant. There was silk in the Duke's voice, but it was draped over steel and the threat of knives in the night.

"Decide well": either to rise up with the Duke of Shu, and expel the King, Luo Yushan. Or—to honor his vow to Luo Yushan, and so stand against the Duke of Shu.

It was true that the King of Minyue, Luo Yushan, was a puppet of Emperor Han Liu Che, the voracious hog of the north, who had already swallowed the King of Donghai, and now snuffled round the kingdoms of Nanyue and Minyue. But it seemed to Baron Nie that going against King Luo Yushan meant going against Emperor Han Liu Che, and the Han people had waxed powerful in recent years. And if the Han had so grown, then surely the Jade Personage must be smiling upon them? Thusly, would not going against Emperor Han Liu Che mean going against the implicit wishes of the Jade Personage?

It had also not escaped Baron Nie's

attention that not one drop of rain had fallen since the Duke of Shu had first hinted at the possibility of rebellion.

You will note, Noble Lord, that the Baron Nie does not refer to the unmatched size of our Lord of Ten Thousand Years' armies, nor to the unexcelled skill and wisdom of his generals, nor to the well-known fractious natures of the Minyue nobility and the doubtful martial skills of the Duke of Shu. I will leave it to my noble lord's discretion as to the importance of these omissions.

His mind in turmoil, Baron Nie started down the hillside path. Behind the Baron, his attendants followed. Their spears and helmets gleamed brightly in the afternoon sunlight, and the sound from their harness and armor was like the jingling of coins.

Baron Nie had traveled to the castle of the Duke of Shu on a different road from the one he returned on, a precaution he deemed simple prudence after the Duke of Shu's parting words. Thus although the landscape was familiar to him in the general, it presented him with novelty in the specific. And so it was that when Baron Nie crossed a stone bridge over the desiccated skeleton of the river—now nothing more than rounded boulders resting on a cracked and sun-baked pave—he was surprised to see a large cemetery on the far bank.

Stone facings rose up the swell of the hill, each flanked by twin stone pylons with prayers incised deeply. A sweep of maples hid the tombs from the hillside pass. What would have been dappled shade at any other time was now a cross-hatching from the bone-naked limbs of the trees. Scarlet maple leaves lay in drifts round the tombs, concealing the straw-yellow grass of the hillside. Apart from reds, browns and yellows—the hues of earth scorched and emaciated—the only colors came from the blue-green of ground ivy as it crept down the hillside, encoiling the topmost tombs, and a cloud of brilliant purple where a gnarled wisteria drooped beside the path, its blossoms falling one by one in the windless air to spiral down to the sun-cracked ground below.

Under the boughs of the wisteria sat an old man on a bamboo table.

I interject again, Noble Lord. The words alone cannot quite capture the manner in which Baron Nie says this. He places a curious emphasis on "old": Under the boughs of the wisteria sat an old *man. It is perhaps similar to the way in which a poet might call a river old. Or a mountain.*

"SAND IS THE BONES OF MOUNTAINS."

[Cambridge University Library Note: Marginal notation here reads "Sand is the bones of mountains. I have seen it." Written in grass script. Probably added c.1840.]

The ancient's beard reached down past his chest. His face was shrunken, cheeks fallen in, skin deeply wrinkled. His eyes had sunk deep into his head, and now they peered out from caves under thick eyebrows of bushy white.

A rope noose hung from a branch of the wisteria above the old man. The rope had worn away the bark on the branch. A keg holding a viscous liquid sat on the bamboo table, giving off a sharp vapor that made Baron Nie's eyes water. Underneath the table were stacks of firewood, tightly bound. A small wooden box was on the table near the old man's hand.

The old man said nothing as Baron Nie approached, did not even look away from his silent contemplation of whatever it was that lay at his feet. And as Baron Nie neared the old man, he realized why that was.

In a rectangle at the old man's feet, the earth was turned over, dry and dusty clods filling a neat-edged hole. A wooden pylon rose next to the grave. Archaic characters on it read: Yu Ning, beloved wife.

Baron Nie noted the old man's clothing—a robe of fine silk, worn but still of the highest quality. He saw the pendant of jade on the old man's chest, and marked the old man's fingers: long and thin and unmarked by field toil. Assuming the man to be the official of the village to which the cemetery belonged, and that the grave at his feet was his wife's, Baron Nie dismounted and politely waited until his presence impressed itself upon the mind of the old man.

When the old man saw Baron Nie, the Baron inclined his head graciously, and expressed his condolences for the death of the old man's wife. The old man's eyes glinted, sunk deep in their caverns beneath his snowy eyebrows, but the old man said nothing. The Baron Nie introduced himself, whereupon the old man bowed deeply.

"I, who am old and foolish, crave your pardon, Noble Lord," the old man said. "I am oppressed by the infirmities of age, and my eyes are weak. I am Yu Kung."

"No pardon is required. Age comes to all men," the Baron replied. "But I am curious. Where is the village to which this cemetery belongs? I am Lord of this province, but to my knowledge there is no village in this valley."

Note, Noble Lord, how the Baron Nie does not mention taxes, nor the non-payment thereof.

The old man did not immediately reply. Rather, he looked up the slope of tombs, and stared in silence at one tomb which lay at the very apex of the cemetery. Baron Nie followed the old man's gaze, and saw a truly ancient tomb. Time had worn it smooth, crumbling the stone as water crumbles sand. Of one stone pylon, only a stump remained. The other was a pitted tooth, gray and cracked. Ground ivy grew over the tomb door, a tangled mat of wrist-thick stems blackened by age.

"You are correct," the old man said finally. "There is no village here. And now, there is only me."

Baron Nie looked at the graves, then back at the old man. "There is no village. And yet you wear the insignia of a fifty-shi official."

"This is so." The old man fell silent.

Baron Nie waited for what seemed to him to be a very long time. A faint

breeze moaned through the skeletal branches of the maples. The dead leaves eddied in crimson flurries, like flames dancing round the graves. Behind Baron Nie, his retainers waited patiently, the only signal of their presence an occasional whinny or stamp of hoof.

"I would know why," Baron Nie said eventually.

The old man turned to look at Baron Nie, and the Baron felt the old man's regard settle on him the way age settles on the chests of the elderly as they lay awake in winter in the small hours before the sun rises.

"Then you shall know, Baron of Nie," the old man said. And though the Baron Nie wanted to speak, the old man's eyes held him fast and he could only listen as the ancient began his tale.

The Old Man's Story

Once I was young, and filled with the vigor of youth. Those days are distant now, but strangely, the eyes of memory see more clearly as their object recedes. Yesterday to me is a phantom thing, a blur of confusion that whirls past and is gone forever. But the days of my youth are sun-drenched and vivid: the colors bright, the sounds clear, the smells pungent. All is crystal and nigh-unbearable sharpness and clarity.

I was spirited then, headstrong. I boxed; I raced; I wrestled. My father tried to restrain me, but I only laughed at him and ran faster. If I had listened, the long river of my life might have flowed a different course. But I did not, and so I sit here looking at the graves of my family.

When I reached my majority, I traveled with my servant to Foshan for the examinations.

On hearing this, Baron Nie gives the faintest of frowns. The examinations have always been held in Nanhai, in the presence of the Luo Kings. But he does not interrupt the old man.

At the end of the second day of my journey to Foshan, I found myself several li from the...

[Cambridge University Library Note: Excision in original manuscript. Estimated seven lines.]

...but the village was a forbidding place. Gloom gathered under the dark pines; it seemed to swallow all sound, so that my servant and I spoke in whispers without truly understanding why. Odd sighing calls came from the forest around us; imagine if a wolf could weep, and then you will know what the calls sounded like. We took a room in the inn—an unwelcoming place, where we were served indifferent food by a surly proprietor and his silent wife.

In the morning, my servant became gravely ill. His skin glistened, and it felt as if coals had been banked beneath: a sullen and unpleasant heat. He shifted to and fro restlessly, muttering to himself with his eyes half-closed.

Alarmed by this, I headed downstairs. The proprietor seemed unsurprised, and directed me to an apothecary on the other side of the village square. It was a house with bunches of dried and fragrant herbs hanging from the eave. Projecting from the front of the house was an iron pole, from which depended a large bronze model of a cicada. I rapped my knuckles twice on the side of the open door, then stepped inside, not waiting for an invitation. Inside, the house was gloomy, the air heavy with dusty smells of spices, herbs and other less readily identifiable scents. Underneath all lay an acridity like that of rat urine.

I looked around the room impatiently, but the shadows gathered thickly, and my eyes could not penetrate the murk for more than a few feet. I remember very clearly that I could not see the walls of the house, and when I turned round, the door behind me was a rectangle of light that seemed to recede against the dim gloom.

"...IMAGINE IF A WOLF COULD WEEP..."

Then a dry and rasping voice spoke from the gloom behind me. "You come about your servant, do you not?"

I whirled round, and there was a man standing close to me in the shadows. How he had come on me unaware, I do not know. His face was peculiar, elongated, with a weak chin and receding forehead, and very dark glittering eyes. He had a wispy beard and mustaches, and his hair was drawn tightly back and sleeked with oil.

And then I realized what he had said. "How do you know?" I demanded.

The man gave a very brief smile, revealing large yellowed teeth. "You should not be concerned for your servant. He will recover." He pointed at me with a pink and naked-looking finger. "You are the one in danger."

"Me?" I drew breath to laugh in his face—but then I remembered how he had known about my servant. "What do you mean, I am the one in danger?"

The man smiled—another quick flash of yellowing incisor. "Three days. That is the span of your life which remains to you. By midnight of the third day, you will be dead."

Fear fluttered in my belly, and so, like all strong young men, I bristled, puffing myself up. "How could you know such a thing?"

"I know many things...Yu Kung," the man said. "Many secrets."

I remember very clearly the sound of my name in his mouth. He drew it out, as if savoring it like a sweetmeat or vintage plum wine. His eyes glittered, and he held his pinkly naked hands close to the front of his chest, the fingers intertwined like the tails of nesting rats.

Now I am old, I know that he frightened me—and more than that, I know why. But young men feel themselves diminished by the admission of fear, even to themselves, and so they mask fear with aggression, substituting truculence for prudent withdrawal.

So it was that I laughed in the man's face. "Three days? But perhaps you can avert this tragedy?"

The man's face seemed to grow even more pointed. His beady eyes regarded me unblinkingly. "Perhaps I

can, Yu Kung."

"Let me guess! For only a small payment?" I laughed again. "You must think I have the brains of a turtle!"

"Ten ounces of silver," the man said. "It is a small price."

"A small price for life," I replied. "But entirely too much to give to such as you! You think to frighten me? You think I am some uneducated yokel, a farmer to be fleeced?"

"Three days," the man said, in his squeaky, raspy voice. His hands rubbed together, close to his chest.

I snorted, then turned to leave. When I reached the doorway, I glanced over my shoulder, and saw the man looking at me from the gloom, a shadowy shape, unclear save for the pointed face and glittering eyes.

When I got back, my servant was still ill. Watching over him, and studying for the examinations, time slipped past quickly. One day passed, then another, and then on the morning of the third day, my servant's fever broke and he sat up and asked for food. It was not until the late afternoon that I recalled the strange man and what he had said to me.

On a whim, so I told myself, I walked out of the inn and over to the house. I paused at the gloomy doorway, then stepped inside. The shop was as shadowy as I remembered, and the smell of rat urine was even stronger.

I waited in the gloom for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. After a moment, a small rustle came beside me, and I turned to see the man watching me from not more than two feet away. He'd stolen up on me again in the dark. His eyes were dark and beady, like obsidian marbles, and he rubbed his curiously naked-looking hands together in front of his chest.

"This is the third day," the man said. His fingers moved restlessly against each other. "Your last day. What is its savor? Do you find it sweet?"

"Show me," I replied, surprising myself, but the peculiar man knew exactly what I meant, as he reached into a pocket of his glossy robe and pulled out a small cylinder of bamboo. He pulled off the leather cap, revealing the yarrow stalks inside. "Watch." He turned sideways, to a table I could not remember seeing before, then counted off the sticks, performing the divination. I watched in silence as the hexagram formed: K'an, the abysmal, water over water. Danger multiplied.

"You know the meaning?" the man asked.

"Give them to me." I held out my hand.

"YOU KNOW THE MEANING?"

The man smiled and stepped away from the table. I gathered the yarrow stalks, took two deep breaths to calm myself, then began the divination, tossing the sticks.

K'an, again. Hexagram 29. I stared down at the stalks. K'an was named The Gorge by some texts, The Abysmal by others. It was water over water: depth and rapid movement, danger foaming and swirling as it rushed toward the diviner. Paths were unclear; risk boiled like white water in a mountain stream.

"You said three days," I said without looking away from the stalks.

The man handed me four wuch'u coins. "Throw."

I tossed the coins onto the table. They landed like dead things—no rolling, no bouncing. Just a leaden fall to the table. Three of the coins had the legend facing up: five grains on the left of the hole, the hourglass on the right. One was blank. I threw again. This time I got three blanks and one inscription.

I stared at the coins and yarrow stalks for a long time. The shadows in the house curdled as the late afternoon sunlight drained from the street outside. But the signs did not change: K'an—danger over danger, and three coins with the same side facing up.

"Ten ounces of silver," I said finally.

"Fate is a boulder rolling downhill," the man said, rubbing his naked hands together. "Three days ago, it moved slowly and would have been easy to push aside, just a little nudge would have been required. Now, however, it has its own momentum and thunders toward you. More effort must be expended to turn it aside."

"How much?" I asked, still looking at the yarrow stalks and coins.

"Thirty ounces of silver."

I digested what he had said for a moment, then turned to him. "Thirty?"

The man just smiled again. His yellowing incisors unsettled me.

Thirty ounces of silver to hide from death, I thought. But perhaps the man was still tricking me? A little sleight of hand to gull the bumpkin? And thirty ounces of silver! That was no small sum.

I looked up then and caught the gaze of the man as he stared at me. Even though his eyes were dark and glittering as volcanic glass, I remember very clearly that I felt like I could see into his mind and read his thoughts. If I close my eyes, I can see the scene in front of me: the afternoon sunlight slants in through the door behind, illuminating a strip of the room, at the far end of which I stand. The sunlight splashes over the hem of the man's glossy black robe—and one corner of my mind notices that the robe looks *furry*. The man's face is in shadow, but not so deep that I can't see the expression of malignant glee stamped on it.

I can admit to myself now that the first thing I thought of was stories my nurse had told me when I was small, stories about gifts from strangers and hidden prices. And I wondered about the smell and the man's pointed face and glossy robe and naked-looking fingers.

But I was a young man, and because young men lie to themselves about all the most important things in their lives, I immediately convinced myself that I was angry because I had realized that the man was trying to dupe me. I had almost fallen for loaded coins and weighted sticks. But, like a fisherman who twitches just as the carp rises for the lure, so the man in the shop allowed his triumph to show on his face just as the mark was reaching for his money pouch.

I was no chicken to be plucked!

Smiling, I let my hand drop away from my belt. "Life and death are fixed," I said, convincing myself as I spoke that this was what I really meant. "If Fate wills my death, then I'll

die. If not..." I shrugged, then turned and walked away from the man.

When I reached the doorway, he called after me.

"Man!"

I turned back, and the man stood right at the end of the bar of sunlight on the floor. He held the yarrow sticks in one hand—although I hadn't heard him gather them up—and four coins in the other. He held them out, grinned his yellow-toothed smile at me, then let them drop.

Most of the sticks landed outside the strip of light, in the shadows where they vanished from sight. But some landed in the sunlit patch, light brown against the rich dark of the floorboards. All the coins landed in a line near the edge of the sunlight.

K'an. And three blanks.

"Charlatan!" I called through the door. "Watch you that I don't call the magistrate to deal with you!" Then I turned and hurried from the house, trying not to listen to the man laughing behind me, a peculiarly unsettling laugh that *changed* as I crossed the village square.

At my room in the inn, the full import of what I had done crept over me slowly. All I could think of was K'an and three coins showing the same face. Telling myself that the man had merely been trying to frighten me (and indeed, he had succeeded, I can admit that now), I took out my sword and sat cross-legged in my room, waiting for...I don't know what.

Even now, as I look back on that moment, with the scent-memory of the pine fire strong and pungent, and the snap-crackle of the wood clear in my ears, I couldn't tell you for certain why I sat there waiting. But I think that the strange man had convinced the deeper part of me that my fate was indeed death. And it is the nature of young men to struggle against fate, to go down kicking and biting rather than meekly submit.

Time passed slowly, measured only by the creeping destruction of the candle. I grew tired, and I was thinking of going to sleep, when I heard a scratching noise from the window, like the claws of a rat.

Looking at the window, I saw a tiny movement. I peered at it, and an inch-high man unfolded himself from where he had been laying flat on the wooden ledge of the windowsill.

I gaped at the apparition. It was a full-formed image of a man carrying a spear and dressed in a long white silk robe, embroidered with tiny white peaches. His miniature topknot waved behind him, but his face seemed very still and fixed.

Then he jumped off the windowsill and when he landed he was full size and lunging at me with his spear.

Although he knows that ghosts and spirits are everywhere—what thinking man could deny this?—the Baron nonetheless does not believe the story the old man is telling him. Tiny men that creep under windowsills? He draws breath to interrupt, but then the old man's gaze catches him again and the Baron feels the weight *of it settling on him and the words shrivel in his mouth.*

I can remember that scene very clearly, but only in frozen instants of time. I see the man leaning forward, his feet apart. His silk robe flares out behind him with his movement; his topknot whips round; the spear head catches the firelight so it looks like a sharp-edged leaf of flame.

AND IT IS THE NATURE OF YOUNG MEN TO STRUGGLE AGAINST FATE, TO GO DOWN KICKING AND BITING RATHER THAN MEEKLY SUBMIT.

But as I have said before, I was a headstrong young man, and fencing was something I had thrown myself into. The robust discussions and unambiguous conclusions of the piste suited my temperament more than the dry analyses that the examinations called for.

In one smooth movement, I deflected his thrust, angling it away from me and springing to my feet. He thrust at me again, his face curiously immobile—but now I was on my feet I parried his blow easily. My backhand riposte took him across the belly, cutting him clean in half.

For an instant, I saw his torso fall one way and his waist and legs another. His expression never wavered from its immobile fixity—and then he was gone. Vanished! Two pieces of paper fluttered to the floor and lay still. A paper man, cut right through the middle.

As might be imagined, I felt very full of myself. Three days, the strange man in the gloomy shop had said. Three days, and then death would come for me. Well, and death had indeed come for me, and I had beaten him off! Sliced him in two!

I settled down to wait. Some time later, I heard another faint scratch at the window. Knowing what to expect, I watched the windowsill carefully. There came a crack of wood as a portion of the shutter was broken away from outside. Through the hole crept a horrible manikin, perhaps as high as a man's hand. It was hunched over and deformed, with long arms and a misshapen lumpy head. Beady eyes regarded me from a face with the color and texture of cured leather, and an over-wide mouth gaped open, revealing brown teeth like broken stakes of wood.

I sprang to my feet, readying myself. The manikin slunk to the edge of the windowsill, cast a sly look at me from under its coarse brow, then dropped to the floor. As it fell, it grew so that when its feet touched the floor, I faced an offensively ill-made thing my own height, despite the fact it was bent over like a turtle.

Immediately it attacked, swinging a great club at me with clumsy strength. But my blood was up, and I darted around its graceless blows, slashing at it with my sword. Within moments large wounds gaped on its legs and arms, but it did not bleed; only a thin red powder sifted from the wounds, the color of crumbled brick dust.

Seeing this, I gripped my sword in both hands and redoubled my efforts.

The manikin gave back before me, its knotted arms—all crooked with muscle and ill-knit bone—could not swing the club to parry my furious attack, and after a series of quick hard blows, the blade of my sword met the twisted neck and sliced clean through it.

The head and torso landed with separate thuds on the floorboards—but the manikin did not die. It wriggled and jerked like a half-crushed insect, glaring at me with its beady little black eyes. This enraged me, and I lay about it with my sword, chopping it into ever smaller chunks. The dismembered hunks of the manikin quivered and flexed with the unnatural life inside them, but finally, all the pieces gave a convulsive shudder at the same time, then stopped moving and vanished.

After the paper man, I had been expecting this, and I bent over and peered at the floor. A tiny clay head peered up at me, crude features fixed in a scowl. The clay figure to which it attached could have been no more than a few inches high. I looked around the room—but I had reduced the rest of the clay figure to shards and fragments of shattered pottery and red dust.

Death had come for me a second time, and a second time I had beaten him off. But as I settled myself cross-legged on my bed, a worm of doubt gnawed at me. A paper man and a clay man—both had come to try and kill me. But who had sent these sorcerous assassins? Unless I was to believe that Horsehead and Oxface had conjured them, then the only other person with reason was the strange man in the gloomy house. I wondered grimly to myself if he had not been satisfied with merely *predicting* my death. Perhaps he was behind these magical killers; slay me, and he would prove his divinatory powers to others.

Such was the train of my thought as I sat on my bed and waited. I thought I was subtle and cunning, but as I look back on it now, I can only wince at the depths of my own myopic stupidity. Doubtless, the reason for this will not have escaped you.

The Baron still does not entirely believe the old man's story—but his disbelief is wavering, eroding under the weight of the old man's stare like a sandbank scoured by floodwaters. His mind sharpened by years of intrigue, the Baron can see the flaw in the young man's reasoning, and the conclusions the Baron draws from this lap at his disbelief; it crumbles slowly away. Though the details are still indistinct, the Baron can see the shape of the revelation ahead; it squats like a toad the size of a mountain, monstrous and crushingly heavy. A breeze sighs past him, and the wisteria blossoms drift past, delicacies of brilliant purple that lazily eddy round the tombs.

THE CREATURE ROARED LIKE A BULL STUNG BY A BITING FLY AND DREW AN IMMENSE SWORD FROM A SCABBARD AT ITS WAIST.

After some time, I heard a heavy step from outside the room. Remembering the manikin and the paper man, I fixed my gaze on the windowsill, expecting at any moment to see a tiny figure creep through and into the room.

There was a short breathless silence, then a long drawn-out creak which sounded vaguely familiar to me.

And then something shot through the window shutters in a shower of splinters and embedded itself in the far wall three inches away from my head, where it thrummed. I turned to look at it, and saw the shaft of an immense arrow vibrating where it had punched clean into the brick of the inn wall. The arrow was a good two yards long, and as wide as the first two fingers of a man's hand.

I looked back at the window in disbelief—where were the tiny manikins? Through the wreck of the shutters, I saw something tall and dark with a coal-black face looking back at me with yellow flaming eyes. It had thick skin—ridged and corrugated like the skin of a horned toad.

Then the eyes retreated and there was another drawn-out creak. I realized what was coming, and I dived to one side just ahead of a second arrow that *whapped* through the air and blasted through my bed in a shower of goose feathers and chips of wood.

I raced from my room, reasoning that I stood more chance outside. As I burst from the inn's front door, a third arrow flashed past my face and thudded into the ground not three inches in front of my nose. It punched so deep into the dry earth that only the feathers were visible. If the creature had waited a moment more, it would have impaled me with the shaft.

Without giving it a chance to shoot again, I rushed round the inn to face the flame-eyed creature. I ran at the demon and dealt it a smart blow on the leg. The creature roared like a bull stung by a biting fly and drew an immense sword from a scabbard at its waist.

But though it was huge and immensely strong, it was also slow. It aimed an overhead blow at me, and I ran through its legs as the sword descended. The huge blade sheared into the side of the inn, smashing through the roof and cutting the building in half. I laid into the creature from behind—Whack! Whack! It bellowed, and whirled round, hacking at me with its sword. But I ducked through its legs again, and the blade hissed through empty air. Behind it again, I hacked into one leg—Whack! Whack! The leg came off at the joint and the thing fell backward with a sound like a felled tree.

I danced out of the way, then leaped back in, laboring the creature with blows from my sword, and each of them rang out like the watchman's wooden gong. I chopped off the thing's arms, then hacked off the legs, then finally severed the creature's head from its body. The yellow fire shooting from the eyes died, and then all at once the figure shrunk, leaving behind only a wooden image about as tall as a man. The face of the image was horrible, grotesque features carved into the wood and painted lurid colors. Every-

where I had hit it with my sword, leaving a gash or nick in the wood, blood had splashed, staining the wood dark.

Nothing else came that night, though I waited with my sword in my hand until morning.

When I told my servant about the events of the night, he agreed that the strange man from the gloomy house must have sent these devils to kill me, and so prove the strength of his own powers of foretelling. Forthwith we set out for the apothecary, me with my sword, and my servant behind with a stout rod of bamboo.

When we reached the shop with the bunches of herbs hanging from the eave and the bronze cicada suspended from the iron pole, we burst into the gloom, brandishing our weapons. But the strange man was not there, nor did we find him as we fumbled through the scented gloom, stumbling around a space which seemed much larger than it had any right to be. The only signs of life we saw were large rats, which sat on their hind legs and watched us with glittering eyes, their tails and paws naked pink against their glossy ebon fur.

* * * *

"And then?" Baron Nie prompted after a long silence.

The old man looked back to the ancient tomb at the top of the hill. Wisteria blossoms drifted down around him. "And then I went home, Noble Lord, back to the house of my parents. I did not die."

"But the man? The devils? What happened at the end?"

A gust of wind blew. The scarlet maple leaves rose, swirled like dancing flames round the tombs, then settled back as the wind died.

"The end," the old man said contemplatively. "I do not know. But as for what happened next, that is very simple. I did not die."

"So the...sorcerer, whoever he was, he was a charlatan, then?" Baron Nie asked.

"Death came for me," the old man said, gazing at the ivy-covered tomb. "And I beat him off. Three times."

"But who sent those demons?" Baron Nie asked. "It cannot have been the sorcerer."

"Yes. Why would the sorcerer send them?" the old man asked. "Inside the inn, fighting with them, I thought that he must have done it to prove his power, to show that his dooms came to pass."

"But you were alone in the shop," Baron Nie said.

"Yes."

"How could anyone know the horoscope he drew for you? If he wanted to prove his power, there would have had to be an audience," Baron Nie said, thinking aloud. "If he merely claimed to have foretold your death after the fact, who would believe him?"

"Just so, Noble Lord." The old man looked back at the ivy-draped tomb at the top of the cemetery.

"So why?" Baron Nie asked.

"I asked myself that same question," the old man said. "And after... some time, I went to try and find the silent village again. I traveled to...

[Cambridge University Library Note: Excision in original manuscript. Estimated four lines.]

...but though I waited for...a long time, the sorcerer did not show himself. I have returned many times, but I have not seen him again. Perhaps a man can only see him once."

He was silent for a long moment. The wind gusted again, stronger this time, and distant thunder rumbled. Finally, the old man spoke again. "He told me that death would come in three days. And indeed, death came. Three times, and I beat him off three times. Did the sorcerer send them? Or did he merely foretell? I do not know; I cannot know. All I am left with is this: I did not die. *I have not died.*"

HOW LONG IS SORROW?
HOW MANY YEARS IS DESPAIR?

Baron Nie looked down at the freshly dug grave at his feet and knew in a sudden and awful flash of knowledge that the grave was not that of the old man's wife—or his daughter, or even his granddaughter. He looked up the slope of the hill, where the scarlet maple leaves danced and eddied round the stone pillars that marked the graves, the stone pillars that rose like teeth—the newest bright and sharp, those further back pitted and weathered, and those at the top of the hill ground down by the slow constant pressure of time into little more than eroded stumps. And as Baron Nie looked, he saw that every single pillar bore the name of Yu.

The old man's eyes were dark in their hollows under the bushy white brows, so dark they looked like pools of deep still water that went down and down and down to where the water is freezing and lightless and the only life is pale worms crawling in the abyssal mud. Baron Nie thought of what those eyes had seen, and he felt his life turn insubstantial, as if the scenes of his life were but childish ink sketches on thin paper held up to the light.

"How long?" Baron Nie asked, and his voice sounded thin and reedy, a mayfly's whine.

"How long?" The old man's gaze did not leave Baron Nie's. "Long enough to watch my wife grow gray and shrivel before I put her in the earth. Long enough to see the whole span of my children's lives. Long enough to see my family blossom like this wisteria above me—and long enough to see those blossoms wither and fall from the tree one by one, until there was only one left. How long, Noble Lord? How long is sorrow? How many years is despair? I feel time on my shoulders, and its weight is crushing, but I cannot shrug." He reached up and turned down his collar, exposing the wattled, sagging skin of his neck—and the livid marks left by a noose.

Baron Nie looked at the old man's neck. His mouth was dry. He licked his lips, sought for words, but they eluded him.

The wind whipped up the maple leaves, swirled them round Baron Nie's legs. Wisteria blossoms eddied round the old man's shoulders, settling on his silk robe and the keg by his side, drifting down onto the liquid and sticking to the surface. And

Baron Nie knew what the liquid was now, and just why it smelled so sharp and looked so viscous, and he knew why bundles of wood were stacked so neatly under the bamboo table, and what was in the small wooden box next to the old man.

"Leave me now, Baron of Nie," the old man said, his voice like the slamming of stone doors deep underground.

And Baron Nie bowed deeply, then climbed onto his horse, his eyes unseeing, his hands twitchy and restless. Without speaking, without even glancing behind him at the gleaming armor and sun-bright silk of his retainers, he kicked his horse into a gallop and rode from the wisteria and the cemetery and the terrible old man.

He did not stop until he reached the hillside pass on the far side of the valley. There, he reined in his sweaty horse and looked back down into the parched and bone-dry valley. His retainers clattered toward him, armor jingling. But Baron Nie looked over their heads, down to the bridge that spanned the dried-out river, to where a pillar of smoke rose from a stand of leafless maples, flames visible as tongues of yellow and orange as they licked at the naked branches. The wisteria was a pillar of fire, sending flaming blossoms eddying up in the air.

* * * *

And that was the end of the story the Baron Nie related to me, O Princely Lord. You will have noted the symmetry. The old man defied the natural order, for as the Western Sage teaches us, death comes to all things, and the only certainty is flux. By defying Heaven's will, Yu Kung planted a seed, which over time sprouted and grew into a twisted and poisonous tree, bearing the bitter fruit tasted by Baron Nie as he rode past the old man on his way back from Minyue.

Baron Nie was confronted by a choice—whether or not to rise up against King Luo Yushan. But Luo Yushan was the creature of Emperor Han Liu Che, and it seemed to Baron Nie that Emperor Han Liu Che held the Mandate of Heaven. How could he have waxed so powerful if this were not the case? Deposing King Luo Yushan, then, meant defying the will of Heaven. As with the old man, Baron Nie held a seed in his hand; if planted, he would water it with tears before plucking its wormwood fruit.

And so, on returning to Minyue, Baron Nie pursued the prudent course of not replying to the Duke of Shu's messengers and of secluding himself in his summer palace on the slopes of Guo mountain along with several hundred trusted men. As you well know, Noble Lord, the Duke of Shu marched on Nanhai a month later, unaware that our Lord of Ten Thousand Years, Emperor Han Liu Che, had reinforced the garrison with twenty thousand of his own men. Thus, when the rebellion was crushed, and the Duke of Shu's head removed from his body and displayed on a pike at the gates of Nanhai, Baron Nie yet resided in his summer palace, among the pine-scented breezes of Guo mountain.

The day after the battle at Nanhai, it rained.

You see, Noble Lord, how the stories nest one inside the next, close-fitting and furled, like the petals of the lotus? The inner story ends in fire and drifting wisteria blossoms of flame. The middle story ends in rain, and the smell of pine on the crisp mountain breeze.

But what of my story?

There are things you do not know about me, Noble Lord. A man in my position must assiduously cultivate the appearance of detachment: the Cold Face, as the Xiong Nu call it. But beneath the mask—who knows? Under the smooth face of a man cut deep, of a man robbed of his manhood, hidden passions might smolder; like a well-banked fire, they would reveal nothing of their glowing heart save the faintest wisp of smoke.

When Baron Nie told me this story, his words were like the blacksmith's shovel, pulling aside the banked ash and clinker and allowing the fire to breathe. A desire woke in me, and I began to wonder.

I found the valley easily. The fire had chased itself round the desiccated valley sides until nothing was left save ash and blackened trees. But the rains had come, and already green shoots sprouted from beneath the rain-slicked ash, and delicate new leaves were unfurling from the fire-seared branches of the trees.

YOU SEE, NOBLE LORD, HOW THE STORIES NEST ONE INSIDE THE NEXT, CLOSE-FITTING AND FURLED, LIKE THE PETALS OF THE LOTUS?

The tombs still sat on the hillside, but the fire had devoured the ground ivy, leaving behind only its charred remains. Smoke and ash streaked the stone of the tombs.

The door to the oldest tomb was open. I stopped at the pillars outside to read the inscription, but time had obliterated forever the words carved into them. I took a deep breath, smelling rain and ash and damp earth—and something darker underneath, acrid like horse urine. And then I stepped inside the tomb.

What did I find there? Ah, noble lord, surely you do not expect description? The essence of beauty—and so of horror—is in what lies concealed, whether the beauty is that of a woman, a poem, or a painting. The artist's duty is to *suggest,* no more—and then let the mind of the beholder construct its own glittering fantasy or night-crawling horror.

And horror is indeed what crawled in that tomb, blind and mewling and awful. Yu Kung had wanted to die, but death would not come for him. Yu Kung thought to force death's hand—you have not forgotten the noose, Noble Lord? The rope marks that Baron Nie saw upon Yu Kung's neck? But still death would not come. So Yu Kung turned to fire, thinking that flames would surely kill him.

He was wrong.

The fire burned him—but he did not die. He *could* not die. And I found

what remained of him in the tomb, where he had dragged himself after the fire had consumed the maples and the dried leaves and the wisteria and much of Yu Kung.

I will not describe what he looked like.

Yu Kung gave me what I wanted to know—the location of the mountain pass and the closed-up village and the strange little house with the brass cicada hanging from the eave. At this point, Noble Lord, you are perhaps wondering what bizarre torture I employed to force Yu Kung to reveal this information. Your quick and nimble mind will be flitting among the grimly shining tools of the torturer's art, razor-edged brushes for painting in crimson and pain, mind-fingers brushing each just long enough to dismiss it and move to the next.

The answer, of course, is simple; I brought him water.

A week later, I was in the silent village. Nothing had changed from Yu Kung's description; gloom enveloped the place, and strange sighing calls came from the shadows beneath the spreading branches of the somber pines. I took a room in the inn. In the morning I walked into the gloomy shop with the brass cicada hanging from the eave, and the man was there waiting for me, looking exactly as Yu Kung had described him: a black and somehow *glossy* looking robe, a pointed face, and nervous, pinkly naked fingers.

He knew of you, Noble Lord. And he knew of my son. He told me how you had sent the boy to the headsman, and what you had done with my son's body afterward.

How did he know? Listen, Noble Lord! Do you hear them? In the walls? You cannot, you say? I think you will hear them tonight, Noble Lord, when sleep does not come to you.

I made a bargain with the man. Gold for him, and knowledge for me. Three days later, I walked out of the inn, leaving behind me a scorpion made of paper, a spider made of pottery, and a snake made of wood—the scorpion cut through with a pair of scissors, the spider and snake smashed to flinders with a hammer as they crept through the tiny gap under the door of my room. Preparation and prudence secured for me the same end as Yu Kung's strong sword arm had gained for him.

Death came for me three times—and I was ready. I beat him off, and he will not come for me again.

So now I sit here in the best room of an inn on the Chang'an road, finishing my report to you, Noble Lord. Beneath my robe, bloodless wounds gape open. They will not heal, but neither will I die. The pain from them racks me—strange how flesh that has bled its last can still feel pain—but it is mitigated by joy, Noble Lord.

What joy, you ask? Ah, Noble Lord, it is the thought of our eventual reunion that fills me with inexpressible delight. I have many things to show you, Princely Lord. A *very many* things.

So listen carefully, Noble Lord. Listen to the noise of the rats in the walls. Listen to the rustle of pink and naked feet as they scamper down their secret tunnels. Listen to the susurrus of sleekly furred bodies rubbing one against the next. Listen to the creak of floorboards, the sigh of the wind, the dolorous clang of the watchman's gong.

Listen hard, and perhaps you will hear me coming.

LISTEN HARD, AND PERHAPS YOU WILL HEAR ME COMING.

Euan Harvey lives in England with his wife and three sons. He writes a little and runs a lot. He was diagnosed with metastatic melanoma in 2009.

"How far would you go to save your marriage?"

The Banishing
by Fiona Dodwell

eBook ISBN: 9781615723515
Print ISBN: 9781615723522

When Melissa first notices the change in her husband - subtle at first - she thinks it may be the stress of moving into their new home. Or working long hours. But soon her husband turns into something far darker, far more sinister. Who or what is the dark shadow living beneath her husband? What is haunting him? Melissa must quickly find the answer to these questions, because Mark is changing, and fast. Soon her fight will be for her life, as well as for her marriage.

http://fionasfiction.wordpress.com/

THE TIDES OF THE HEART
by David D. Levine
Illustration by Lori Koefoed

Older houses might be charming but they can be a nuisance to maintain. Sometimes the charm is actually part of the problem.

The house was a nice Craftsman bungalow, sturdy and square, with good solid gutters and no problems I could feel from the porch. I pushed the bell.

The guy who came to the door was a head taller than I, but going soft in the gut. "Are you...from Lou's Plumbing?"

"I *am* Lou's Plumbing," I said. "Louise Hartmann. We spoke on the phone."

The guy flinched at the strength of my grip. "Sorry. I was expecting..."

"Someone taller? Yeah, I get that all the time." He'd been about to say "a man," of course, but I didn't have time right now for the usual dance around my gender. I was scheduled for salvage on a big demolition job in the Pearl today, and I'd only squeezed this guy in because he'd said it was an emergency. "So, what seems to be the problem?"

He showed me a kitchen sink half-full of standing water, and the same in the tub. "Which way to the basement?" I asked, pretty sure I knew what the problem was.

He led me down the stairs and I knelt over the floor drain. Placing my hands on the cool concrete to either side of the rusty grille, I extended my perceptions through the concrete to the lead pipe below.

It was just as I'd suspected: there was a nixie living in the drain. Typical for a bungalow of this vintage. There's something about that lead U-bend they find comfortable. But this one was pissed off about something, which explained the backup in the kitchen and bath.

The guy was still standing on the steps. "What do you see?"

I sighed to myself. There was nothing to "see"—a nixie is just a stretch of water with an attitude. I reached my mental fingers past the nixie and quickly found the reason for its annoyance. "Roots," I said. "You've got a root intrusion in your main drain." I stood, brushing my hands on the nubbly fabric of my coverall. "I've got an electric auger in the truck that'll clean them right out."

The rootsweren't enough to cause the clog by themselves, but they were making the nixie unhappy. Clearing them out would restore the balance.

"How much?"

"Depends on how long it takes."

It turned out to be almost three hours. The roots were so dense and prickly that the nixie couldn't get out of the way of the auger, so I had to coax it out into a bucket before I could get to work. And before I could do that, I had to convince the customer to leave me alone—I didn't want to try to explain why I was holding a bucket next to the drain and whispering.

By the time I finally got the nixie back into the drain and all the tools properly racked in my truck, it was almost noon. Everyone at the demo site would be on break until one o'clock, so I had time for a leisurely lunch.

I parked the truck on the east end of the Hawthorne Bridge and walked across the river with my lunchbox, savoring the powerful flow of the Willamette below the bridge's metal grid. But when I was a little more than halfway across I felt the bridge shudder beneath my feet, as though a big truck were going by. But it was no truck—it was the river itself, churning and trembling like a snake with indigestion.

"Was that an earthquake?"

I stopped, clutching the handrail. I'd never felt such a thing before. It was a weird, seasick sensation, the river's spasms making the bridge roll beneath my feet like a ship at sea. But it only went on for a few seconds.

A passing cyclist pulled over next to me, balancing with one hand on the rail. "Was that an earthquake?" he said.

"I'm not sure..."

"Not much of one if it was. Were you here for the Spring Break Quake?"

"Yeah, but this one wasn't like that."

"That one was a real doozy, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." But that wasn't what I'd meant. Whatever this had been, it hadn't been an earthquake at all. More like a riverquake, if there was such a thing. I'd have to ask my mentor Steve if he knew anything about it.

The cyclist and I chatted for a bit about earthquakes we'd known before he rode off with a little salute. After that I leaned on the railing, looking down over the now-peaceful river, until I regained my composure.

I continued to the other end of the bridge, then walked down the esplanade to the Salmon Street Springs and sat on a bench with my lunch. I've always enjoyed this fountain, with the ever-changing dance of the jets above ground paralleled by the complex flows of water through the pipes below. It was all controlled by computers, of course, but it felt natural and refreshing and pretty soon I felt much better. Bathing-suited children laughed in the spring sunshine, darting from one nozzle to the next, half hoping and half fearing they'd be drenched by the next big squirt. Unlike me, they couldn't feel it coming.

The kids made me wonder how Shelly was doing. Even though we hadn't been a couple for over two years, we were still best friends—which was a good thing, since she worked for the water bureau and we couldn't completely avoid each other even if we'd wanted to. She'd gotten domestic-partnered with her new sweetie Jenni on the very first day it became legal, and I'd just heard that they were doing the artificial insemination thing.

I didn't know how I felt about that.

Don't get me wrong—I was happy for them. But the news reminded me

that I'd had my chance with Shel and blown it, the same way I'd blown every other relationship I'd ever had. Despite the stereotype of lesbians and U-Hauls, I'd never moved in with a lover; in fact, I never seemed to be able to hang onto a girlfriend for more than a couple of months. It's not as though I didn't know why... Cindy said I was "grabby," Linda called me "Octopus Girl," and Debra-the-firefighter thought I was "too touchy-feely." Physically I was very affectionate, but when it came to an emotional connection I always seemed to hold a part of myself back. So when Mara came along, I tried to change my pattern. But physically I felt strait-jacketed, chafing and struggling against the limits I'd placed on myself, and emotionally...well, when we both realized I was just faking it, we'd blown up in a toxic firestorm of recriminations that just about put me off dating for good.

I often told myself that if I lived with a woman I'd run the risk of her finding out about my Guild work, but I was sometimes honest enough to admit that was only a rationalization. After all, most of the guys in the Guild were married or partnered, and *they* managed to keep it secret.

The Guild had to be kept secret. Our job was to maintain the balance between this world and the other one, and the more the general public knew, the harder that would be.

* * * *

After lunch I walked back to the truck, then drove up to the job site in the trendy Pearl District, where three residences were being torn down for a mixed-use condo/retail development. Although I agreed with most Portlanders that increased density was better than urban sprawl, I still hated the loss of those good old houses. At least the developer was salvaging them first, removing the old fixtures and millwork for re-use.

That was my job. It wasn't glamorous, but not everything I do touches on the other world. Guild or not, I'm a plumber, and a girl's gotta eat.

The foreman was a guy named Charlie Bates, lean and black and impeccably dressed. He was much too smooth for his office, which was the usual job-site trailer with the usual splintery woodgrain paneling inside. "You're late," he said as he handed me the release forms.

"Sorry. I had an emergency call." I scrawled my signature, and handed the clipboard back.

Charlie checked the forms and gave me a badge. "Hey, did you feel that earthquake?"

"Yeah..."

"Radio says there's actually been a whole series of mini-quakes this week. End times comin'." But he gave me a little wink to show he wasn't serious. "You'd better get moving now; the carpenters are four hours ahead of you. Use your own best judgment about what's salvageable, but don't dawdle—we have to get the whole site leveled by the end of the day Friday." It was now Thursday.

"Got it," I said, and grabbed a hard hat on my way out.

Inside the chain-link fence, the job site was a mess of dust and grit and splinters. A big yellow excavator stood by, a hulking muscular machine with a giant claw that would rip those houses down in a matter of hours once they were salvaged. One of them was already bare of its decorative millwork, with the second in the process of being stripped. The third...

It was like meeting an elegant older woman at a party.

It was like meeting an elegant older woman at a party. A woman whose beauty arises from the wisdom of her years, a woman sheathed in smooth black velvet, a woman clasped with diamonds at ears, wrists, and throat. You just want to take her in your arms right there and then, but you know you can't, because she's so far above you.

The third house's paint was cracked and peeling, with rough gray wood beneath. Weeds, and even small trees, grew from cracks in its front walk. But the house stood straight and tall, gracefully proportioned and ornamented with a tasteful minimum of gingerbread, and not a single window pane was cracked.

This was no ordinary abandoned house. Something was protecting it. It ached of the other world.

Three older women stood outside the chain-link, tut-tutting to each other about the sorry state of the world today. "'Scuse me, ladies," I said, "but can you tell me anything about that house there?"

"Nobody's lived there as long as I can remember," said the one with the Beavers baseball cap.

"It dates from 1850," said the one in plaid. "Supposedly Captain Couch built it for his mistress."

"Huh." John Heard Couch, pronounced "kooch," was a sea captain and one of the founding fathers of Portland. A whole square mile of the city, including Chinatown, the train station, and the Pearl, used to be his property, and we were right in the middle of it.

I thanked the ladies for their time and made my way up the walk. Although the land was pretty flat here, it felt like walking uphill. Each front step felt three feet high, and when I crossed the porch it was like walking into a stiff wind. It was only my native talent and Guild training that made it possible for me to continue; any ordinary person would have felt vaguely uncomfortable and turned around. Probably wouldn't even remember having tried.

I'd brought a prybar with me, but the front door swung open to my touch. Stepping over the threshold felt like pushing through a gluey membrane, but once I was inside the feeling of pressure vanished completely.

I found myself in a tall, elegant entry hall, with a long straight staircase sweeping up on the right and a spacious parlor to my left. The place smelled like my grandmother's attic, a little musty but not unpleasantly so.

There was no furniture at all.

There was also no dust.

Curiouser and curiouser, said Alice.

I closed my eyes and held out my hands to either side. What I felt was

unlike any house I'd ever been in. Pipes ran in bizarre, random directions through every single wall and floor, like a mad dryad's trail or a poem written in some alien language. But with the house's water shut off it was a dead trail, a poem unread.

There was one other thing here I'd never felt before, something I couldn't put a name to. A sense of enormous power under great pressure, like a deep ocean current. I headed up the stairs to the locus of the sensation.

In the clawfoot bathtub lay an undine.

My heart damn near stopped.

I've been in the Guild for most of my life, ever since my sponsor and mentor Steve McGonagall spotted a natural talent in a six-year-old shirtless tomboy playing endlessly with the hose in her front yard. In that time I'd met nixies, nymphs, sprites, nereids, and various other water spirits. All of these were pretty much the same kind of creature—in the same way that a cat and a cow are both mammals—being inseparable from the water in which they lived. Even undertows and tsunamis were pretty much the same thing, just bigger and meaner. But there was a whole separate class of intelligent water spirits, including kelpies, sirens, and undines, that I'd never encountered and never wanted to. They could sink ships. They could cause horrendous storms. And they were notoriously temperamental.

This one, though, wasn't going to be hurting anyone any time soon. If the undine in the Guild manual was Venus on the half shell, this was a spoiled oyster.

The undine lay on her back in the tub, a human female figure made all of water, with sea foam forming the hair on her head and elsewhere. But the foam swirled sluggishly, and the water of her body was still and murky. Her breasts lay flat and shriveled on her chest; her cheeks were sunken. She smelled like a stagnant pond.

And then her eyes flickered open: two dark whirlpools of endless depth and power. At the sight of me she gasped, the air gurgling in the waters of her chest.

At that moment another quake struck, rattling the little Victorian bathroom's windows and the lid of the tank above the toilet. I held onto the sink until the tremor passed.

"Help me," the undine said, in a voice like the wind off the sea.

* * * *

"Turn the water back *on?*" Charlie said to me, one elegant eyebrow raised. "You have no idea how much of a pain it was to get the whole block shut *off.*"

"It's really important," I said. I didn't know where the undine had come from or how she'd wound up in the house, but without free-flowing water she would certainly die. If I let such a rare and powerful creature pass from the world, the balance between this world and the other would be thrown off so badly it would take decades to restore. And if her distress was causing the quakes, as I suspected it was, I didn't want to know what might happen to the city if she died. "The, uh, the historic plumbing needs to be washed out before I can salvage it." Lying to the public is an important part of being a Guild member, but I've always been crap at it.

"No."

"Uh." My mind thrashed, like treading water in a whirlpool. "You shouldn't be able to tear down that house anyway. It's...it's seriously historic."

"Yeah, there was some noise about that, but the developer got eminent domain on the whole block." He shrugged. "Not my department. Now you get back there and finish your job. Or don't. It's up to you. That house is coming down tomorrow, and if some historic plumbing goes to the landfill along with the rest that's just too bad." He leaned over his desk. "And you don't get paid."

"I get it."

* * * *

"Hey Shel," I said, the phone warm in my hand. When we'd been together we'd been Shel and Lou, like a couple of old Jewish guys. "How's the baby-making business?"

"Expensive. I keep telling Jenni we should have gone the turkey-baster route, but we couldn't agree on a donor. What's up?"

"I need a temporary water service permit. Right away."

"What type?"

A power saw started up nearby. I pressed the phone to my ear and moved to the other side of the house where it was a little quieter. "Fire hydrant, short term, for a residence."

Shelly's keyboard clattered. "For how long?"

"Just until Friday." One way or the other.

"Address?"

I told her. The house didn't have a street number on its front wall, not too surprising given its history, but it was painted on the curb.

"Are you sure about that? According to the records, it's a vacant lot."

Of course. "Yes, I'm sure."

"You've got a double check backflow valve, right?"

"Right."

More keys clattered. "Okay, you're good to go." She gave me the permit number and I wrote it on the back of my hand.

"Thanks a million, Shel. Give Jenni a kiss for me."

I went to my truck and got the special five-sided wrench and the valve to convert the fire hydrant's power to something residential plumbing could handle. Fortunately I had permits for both of those already. My ex Debra-the-firefighter had helped me get them.

Nobody noticed me uncoiling the hose and running it from the fire hydrant to the house. Everyone swarming the job site was on his own business, and under the same schedule gun as I was. Though my situation was a little more urgent.

Naturally, the house didn't have a water meter. It took me about fifteen

"Taking a drink from a fire hose" isn't just a metaphor.

minutes to cut the line at the curb and splice in a T, losing a few gallons of water in the process. I swore and waited for another earthquake, but I guess the loss wasn't noticeable. Finally I fitted the big red-painted wrench onto the pentagonal nut on top of the hydrant and pulled.

"Taking a drink from a fire hose" isn't just a metaphor. The hydrant's flow surged with power that I could feel beneath my feet all up and down the block. But the step-down valve did its job and I didn't feel or hear anything leaking from the house. Now I had to check on the undine.

With the water flowing through the house's strange pipes, pushing through its defenses was even harder than it had been before. I was panting and sweating by the time I got to the porch.

I stepped through the door.

And was engulfed by an enraged tsunami.

Water battered my face. Water pummeled my chest. Water pressed me against the door and forced itself into my nose. I choked, tasting salt, feeling it burn in my nose. Then the water receded and I collapsed to the sodden carpet.

I looked up. The undine stood above me, now a swirling waterspout in female form, with clouds for hair and lightning eyes. She gestured with both hands and another wave engulfed me, flinging me once more against the door. "I'm trying to help you!" I gasped as the second wave ebbed. "I was the one who turned the water back on!"

The third wave slammed me even harder, cracking my head against the door behind me. I floated, half-stunned, as the waters raged around me, trying to hold my breath while the currents shook me like a dog with a rag doll. Again the wave withdrew, leaving me choking on the floor.

The fourth wave would surely finish me.

But the fourth wave didn't come.

After a while I managed to stop hacking long enough to get a decent breath, and raised my head to see why I was still alive.

The undine, too, had collapsed on the floor. No longer as shriveled and feeble as she'd been in the tub upstairs, she wasn't a raging goddess any more either...more like a normal human woman, maybe a little on the skinny side, formed of swirling clear water. Clearly she'd overexerted herself in attacking me.

"You are the one?"

I hoped she hadn't killed herself.

Still coughing, I crawled across the carpet toward her. It wasn't nearly as soaked as I'd expected, and I soon realized why: all the water in the room was being drawn back into her liquid body. By the time I got to her, even my hair was dry, and the undine's form had become attractively zaftig. Just my type, I thought, apart from being immortal, inhuman, and quick to anger.

The undine's eyes fluttered open, still dark as storm clouds but now free of lightning. "You are the one?" she said, her breath the salt air after a storm at the coast. "You are the one who caused the water to return?"

I had to turn away and cough some more water out of my lungs before I could reply. "Yes," I managed at last. "I couldn't let you die."

"I am sorry, then, for my attack." She raised herself to one elbow, flowing like a dream into the new position; though her outward form was human, she was still a creature of liquid and currents rather than bone and muscle. "I feared you were the hated Binder, drawn by my weakened state, returned at last to do away with me for good and all. But now I see you are no man at all."

"The Binder?"

"The Captain," she sneered. "The Navigator. The Founder. The *Couch*." She pronounced it "kooch," and her intonation made it a curse. "The one who caught my heart, drew me to this place, then wove the net of life and metal that prisons me here."

"And how long ago was this?"

"One hundred and fifty-nine summers and one hundred and fifty-eight winters."

Now I grasped what must have happened. Although the formal Guild in Portland only went back to the city's population boom after World War II, there have been natural talents as long as there have been people, and Captain Couch must have been one of those. He'd found some way to trap the undine, then engineered the house with its bizarre plumbing to keep her there. That's how the Guild works: although we can sense the other world with our talents, we can affect it only by manipulating the four elements in the physical world.

"He caught your heart, you say."

The undine's brows drew together and I felt the storm gather behind her eyes. "He wooed me and he flattered me and he promised we would marry. He built for me a fine house." She gestured all around. "But when I stepped inside, I found I could not leave. He kissed me once and then he left me here."

Undines are incurable romantics, and have a real tendency to fall in love with human men, even though when an undine marries a human she loses her immortality. I don't get it, myself. But apparently Captain Couch had known this fact and taken unfair advantage of it.

"What a prick," I said.

I just blurted it out, the same way I would if I were talking to a woman at a bar, and immediately wished I could grab my words back before they struck her beautiful wavelike ears. How could I talk like that to someone so...so refined, so ethereal, so supernatural?

But then she smiled. And I felt her heart warm toward me.

I've never felt such a thing before. But, of course, her heart was made of water.

Just as I was about to speak, a tremendous crash from outside rattled the windows and made the whole house shudder. We both turned toward the sound.

Outside the window, the excavator was beginning to tear down the house next door. The enormous metal claw grasped the roof at its peak and pulled, tearing off a hunk of joists and rafters and shingles. Nails and shreds

of insulation rained down as the huge yellow machine turned and dumped the hunk into a metal bin. It landed with a thundering clang that I felt in my gut. Then, with a diesel roar and a whine of hydraulics, the claw machine returned to the house for another bite.

The protective effect that had held Couch's house inviolate for more than a hundred and fifty years only extended to the property line. It wouldn't hold *that* back for a second.

* * * *

Charlie was *not* pleased with me. "No, we cannot delay demolition. I don't care how historic that house is. I don't care how much trouble you're having with the antique water heater. I don't care if you've found a whole freakin' nest of endangered snail darters in the attic. We are on a schedule here, and that house is coming down tomorrow. With you in it, if necessary."

* * * *

"We have to get you out of here today," I told the undine, whose name was Naïda, pronounced "Ny-ee-da." But she couldn't pass through the door or any of the windows. When she tried, she only flattened against the barrier. Even the basement was off-limits to her.

I tried cutting off the water to part of the house, but that just made her cry out in pain and set off another earthquake.

I tore the plaster off the living room wall with my prybar, revealing the strange and convoluted pipes of Naïda's prison. The pattern made no sense to me. I tried moving some of the pipes around, hoping to create an opening in the net, but everything I tried hurt her.

I sat in the living room, looking through the open front door at the bustling job site outside. No one even looked at the house—it was still protected by Couch's work. I remembered how hard I'd had to push to get through the front door the first time I'd come in. "Maybe if we both worked together we could get you through."

"We could make an attempt," she said, with a small shy smile.

We stepped together to the front door, with me standing behind her. Hesitantly I reached out one hand and laid it gently on her hip. Her skin felt like water-skiing, wet and soft and warm, yet firm and vibrantly resistant.

My heart pounded. But what was I nervous about, really? Saving an undine, or the close proximity of this warm, feminine creature? "Ready?" I put my other hand on her other hip.

Naïda nodded. Was she, too, trembling?

I swallowed and leaned my shoulder into the space between her shoulder blades, pressing her against the barrier. The warm fluidity of her body resisted the effort—it felt like living tissue, though unlike flesh and bone. She grunted, and I felt her torso thrum with the sound. "Am I hurting you?"

"Keep pushing," she said through gritted teeth. "I think...we are getting...a little farther in..."

I pressed harder, putting all the strength of my back and legs into it, the smooth warmth of her watery skin trembling beneath my cheek. I could feel the strain in her as I crushed her against the unyielding barrier, but she refused to complain, bearing the pressure for long minutes. At last another quake began, rattling the house's structure, and she shrieked in anguish. Panting, I fell back, and she landed with a soggy thud on the carpet beside me.

"I'm sorry," I said, sitting up and taking her hand as the tremor subsided.

"Do not regret," she gasped, and laid her other hand on my cheek. "I thank you for your endeavors."

I took her in my arms, the warm moist weight of her pressed against me. She was so brave, so steadfast, so fearless...there had to be some way to save her.

* * * *

Steve, my mentor, was mostly retired now. He'd gone all round and gray, and he moved like his bones ached, but he still had that bricklayer's grip. We sat at his kitchen table, with Guild manuals and maps spread all over the smooth cool Formica. Outside, night had already spread its blanket over the city.

"Lookie here," he said, and smoothed out an old plat map of Portland. "This is Couch's Addition." He traced the boundaries of a rough triangle bounded by Burnside, 23rd Avenue, and the Willamette River. "And here's your undine." His rough finger smacked down. "Right in the middle of it."

"So?"

"Trust an old bricklayer. She's the foundation of his empire."

We hauled out more maps, including some arcane Guild treasures I'd never before been allowed to handle. Fault lines, underground streams, ley lines...they all passed right through, or at least near, the house.

Steve tapped his nose with one finger, as he often did when deep in thought. "I feel a right fool," he said after a time. "We should have known all along that she was there...that everything depended on her."

"You should see those pipes. Couch was some kind of genius, and he wanted to make sure *nobody* would ever find out she was there. If the water hadn't been cut off, even I probably wouldn't have been able to force my way into the house the first time."

"Maybe so." He tapped his nose again. "But now we've got a bit of a situation."

I waited. I had a feeling I wasn't going to like this.

"I believe," Steve said at last, "that Portland's entire maritime economy has been driven by the presence of this undine, since 1850. She may be the reason that Portland overtook Oregon City as the territory's preeminent city. In a sense, she *is* the city. And if she dies, or even if she goes free..."

Economic collapse. Earthquakes. End times.

"It would be bad," I said.

"It would be bad," Steve said, nodding.

"She's the foundation of his empire."

* * * *

Steve called in Todd Piaskowski, an HVAC guy, and Hank Muller, a furnace guy, to help. Together we formed what the Guild called a "full house" of water, earth, air, and fire. We pounded our brains against the problem for hours, trying to get our hands around a very thorny problem without getting injured.

Finally, about one in the morning, we agreed we couldn't think of anything better than the plan we had. We gathered our equipment and headed off in my truck.

None of us spoke as we drove through the dark and empty streets.

Our first stop was the Salmon Street Springs. Hank and Todd stood watch while Steve and I opened the control box, rejiggering the fountain's computers to a flow pattern approximating Couch's design. If this worked, the fountain would sustain Naïda and keep her tied to Portland, though allowing her more freedom than she'd had before. There were enough ley lines and underground streams in this area that she'd still be connected to the city.

Todd cut the lock on the job site's chain link fence, and we drove the truck up to the house, passing right under the raised claw of the excavator. It waited atop the mound of rubble where the other two houses had been, as though hungry for more. I helped Steve push his way through the house's defenses, then left him there to talk with Naïda while Todd, Hank, and I hauled tools and materials inside. We set up in the kitchen, close to the sink.

After about an hour we were as done as we were going to be. Steve had built a rough and sloppy pentacle of brick on the kitchen floor, and I'd surrounded it with a circular metal trough of water. A propane burner sat atop each point of the pentacle, unlit, and Todd had rigged up some fans and vanes to send air swirling around the thing in a clockwise direction.

A pipe led from the center of the pentacle to the drain under the sink.

"Doesn't look like much," Hank said, poking at the still-wet mortar.

"It'll do," said Steve.

As we'd worked, Naïda had sat watching, with worry rolling off of her like cold air from an open freezer. The plan was to temporarily transform her into elemental water, then send her down the drain and through the sewers to the Salmon Street Springs.

Nothing like this had ever been done before.

Nothing like this had ever been done before.

Hank flicked an empty cigarette lighter, striking sparks, and lit each of the propane burners. Then Todd switched on the fans. The air began to whirl around the room, dragging the water in its trough, and each of the little blue flames moved in a clockwise circle. Under it all the brick pentacle stood firm, lending its strength to the assemblage. I felt the flow of the other world swirling in a vortex around the pipe in the center.

"It's time," said Steve, and held out his hand to the undine.

Naïda sat in the corner, shivering, and hugged her knees tightly to her chest. A minor tremor shook the earth. "I am not strong enough."

I stood before her and placed my hands on her shoulders. "There's no other way."

She looked up at me, those dark whirlpool eyes now clouded over with fear. "Hold me," she said, and flowed up into my arms.

We stood together, drawing strength from each other, until she felt ready. Then, still holding my left hand and looking over her shoulder at me, she extended one foot into the vortex.

The foot began to melt, to stretch and twist, to flow into a new, inhuman shape.

And she screamed.

Even Steve, whose hearing was none too keen these days, clapped his hands over his ears. Naïda's scream was a horrid, piercing thing that wrenched my gut even harder than her hand clenched mine. The earth juddered and shook beneath us, making the propane flames gutter.

"Stop it!" I shouted. "It's killing her!"

Hank twisted the valve on the propane tank. The flames puffed out, the vortex stilled, and Naïda's foot returned to its previous shape. She fell heavily against me, sobbing into my shoulder.

"She was right," I told my Guild colleagues. "She's too weak to take it." She'd endured a week without free-flowing water before I showed up, and hadn't yet recovered her full strength. If she stepped all the way into that pentacle, there was no way she would survive.

And I couldn't bear the thought of that.

A warm, wet hand laved my cheek. I opened my eyes. "It is a pity we cannot marry," Naïda said. "Then at least you and I could be together for one lifetime."

At that moment three facts snapped together in my head.

The first fact was something about Oregon. After a couple of years of backing and forthing, we'd finally settled on a compromise in the gay marriage debate, and it was now legal for same-sex couples to become registered domestic partners.

The second fact was something about undines. Undines are prone to fall in love with humans, but if they get married, the undines become mortal.

The third fact was something about me. I was crazy in love with Naïda, although I hadn't really grasped the fact until just now.

I explained my idea.

The five of us argued about it for hours. There was no telling what the effect of a same-sex domestic partnership with an undine might be, but Steve knew an awful lot about the other world and he was pretty sure that only one of two things was likely to happen.

One was that Naïda would turn mortal. Portland might not be as prosperous as it was when she was an undine, but as long as she was alive it would be okay. We'd have one human lifetime to find another way to keep

the city stable. And Naïda and I would be together.

The other was that I would be destroyed for my presumption.

I swallowed hard. I could run away, the way I'd run from so many other relationships. Or I could risk my life to save the city and get the girl.

"I'll take the chance," I said, and pulled out my phone.

"Who the hell are you calling at this time of night?" Hank asked.

"My ex Cindy. She works for the county clerk's office."

* * * *

"H'lo?" Cindy muttered, when she finally picked up.

"Hey, Cin, it's Lou. I need a favor. A big favor."

There was a long eye-rubbing and sitting-up pause. "How big?"

"Really, really big." I explained what I needed.

"Ohhh...kay," she said at last. "But you'll need to have it notarized."

I swallowed. "I'll take care of that. You just bring the form as soon as you can."

Steve caught something in my face as I ended the call. "What's wrong?"

I explained the situation. "And I do know a notary..."

"But?"

"You remember Mara?"

"Oh."

Mara was the one ex I wasn't on good terms with. We'd stayed together longer than any of my other relationships, but when we broke up...it was Bad with a capital B and that rhymes with T and that stands for Traumatic. But even after all that, I knew she still respected me. And I still trusted her.

Amazingly, her number was still in my phone.

* * * *

"Pick up the phone, Mara, it's Lou." I repeated that over and over as Mara's voice mail message played itself out. I kept repeating it after the beep. I knew she kept her phone machine next to her bed. At least, she had when we'd been dating.

Please be home, I thought. Please please please...

"Lou? Lou, you ham-handed bull-dagger, do you know what the fuck time it is?"

"I know what time it is, Mara. Listen, I need something notarized and I need it right away. As in now, this minute. It's really, really important."

A long pause. "This had better be good."

"It's a domestic partnership certificate." I swallowed. "For me."

She literally laughed out loud. "For Ms. Never-Gonna-Date-Again? Who's the unlucky bride?"

"You'll have to come here if you want to find out."

Another pause, then: "All right, where's 'here'?"

I grinned into the phone. Mara never could resist a mystery.

* * * *

Cindy showed up half an hour later, with the windows brightening and the city beginning to rouse itself around us. Even in sweats, with her hair all mussed, she was still perky. I've never known how she manages it.

"Cindy," I said after helping her up the steps, "this is Naïda."

"Whoa," she said.

While Cindy was still goggling, Mara arrived, in full lawyer drag complete with makeup and heels. "I have got to see the woman who..."

She never finished that sentence. It was a while before she finished any of her sentences, actually. First time I'd ever seen her speechless.

"You'll have to come here if you want to find out."

We'd have to swear them both to secrecy, of course. But the life of the city depended on this.

"Okay," Cindy said after she'd calmed down a little. "Here's the form. You both need to show photo ID with proof of age."

I hauled out my driver's license. For Naïda we used the house's address, gave 4/1/50 as the date of birth, and made up a driver's license number.

"You know I could lose my commission for notarizing a false document," Mara said as she crimped the form with her notary public's seal.

"If it comes to that," I said, "we'll testify before the Secretary of State that you did it to save the city from destruction by earthquake."

"Yeah, that'll help." She slipped the seal back into its leather case. Then she stood, hands on hips, and regarded Naïda seriously for a moment. "Listen," she said to the undine, "are you sure you want to go through with this? Lou here hasn't ever made a long-term relationship work. She's great with her hands, but she isn't willing to risk her heart."

"This time it's different," I protested. But deep down inside I wondered if I was only fooling myself. I'd been infatuated before...

Then Naïda snuggled up next to me, her warm heavy arm flowing over my shoulders. "I have been alone for too many summers and too many winters," she said. "I have been ensnared, and I have been deceived, and I have been abandoned, but I know that I can trust this Lou and that she will never let me go. My heart yearns for her as the tides follow the moon."

I turned and took Naïda in my arms. I had no words.

Steve cleared his throat and pointed out the window. The job site was beginning to stir. I nodded and took Naïda over to where Cindy stood, while Steve and the others prepared the pentacle again.

"Okay," said Cindy, "I will now sign the form. Then you'll be all official." She smiled at me. "I'm so happy for you."

I swallowed. We hadn't told Cindy or Mara about the possible consequences. In sixty seconds I'd be married...or dead.

She signed the form.

Immediately I felt the forces of the other world welling up around the two of us. They swirled and coalesced like a waterfall of light, like a whirlpool of gravity, spinning ever closer, ever tighter.

I looked into Naïda's eyes.

And then came the change.

Suddenly I flowed, I surged, I rolled like the tide. I smelled salt and tasted pure water. My vision shimmered.

Cindy gasped. I turned toward her and felt the currents swirling in my chest.

My coverall felt funny. It slipped away, falling down my body, passing right through my limbs to land in a soggy puddle on the linoleum. A moment later the water ran out of the coverall and back up my legs. My shimmering, transparent legs.

"I can feel...myself," I said, feeling the air gurgle past my lips. The words were inadequate, but they were all I had to express the joy that overflowed my heart. After a lifetime of working with water spirits, sensing their moods and flows, I had become one myself. I understood my own heart now, in a way I'd never been able to before. And I knew that I loved Naïda with every drop of it.

Naïda too felt my heart's flow, as I'd always been able to feel hers. "Oh, my love," she said, and took me in her arms.

We flowed together, becoming a single fluid entity, bonded and encompassed and powered by the strength of our mutual love. Together we were more than strong enough. More than strong enough for anything.

Outside the window, the excavator's diesel engine coughed to life.

"You'd better get going," we said to Steve and the rest, "before they tear this house down around your ears. Thanks for everything."

And then we dove into the center of the pentacle, and down the drain.

We emerged at the Salmon Street Springs, just beginning its daily show. The central jet streamed into the air and we sailed with it, high above the joggers and the bicyclists and the early commuters.

Our people, to protect and nurture forever.

We laughed and danced together atop the fountain's sparkling waters.

David D. Levine has sold over forty science fiction and fantasy stories to all the major markets, including *Asimov's, Analog, F&SF,* and *Realms of Fantasy.* He has won a Hugo Award, been nominated for the Nebula Award, and won or been shortlisted for many other awards. His fiction has also appeared in numerous year's best anthologies as well as the revised version of *Wild Cards Volume I.* His web page is at www.bentopress.com/sf/.

Follow Realms of Fantasy on Twitter at:
http://twitter.com/RealmsofFantasy
and on Facebook at:
http://www.facebook.com/RealmsOfFantasy

Name: _____
Address: _____
City: _____
State: _____ Zip: _____
Phone number: _____
email address: _____

REALMS OF FANTASY
P.O. Box 1208
Santa Rosa, CA 95402
www.rofmag.com

☐ Check here if you would like us to send you email reminders when it's time to renew.

YES! I want to subscribe to Realms of Fantasy Magazine.

Print
☐ One year (Six issues): $19.99

☐ Two Years (Twelve Issues): $34.99

☐ International One Year: $29.99

Electronic
☐ PDF One Year (Six Issues): $14.99

Electronic issues will be sent to you via email.

☐ Check or money order enclosed

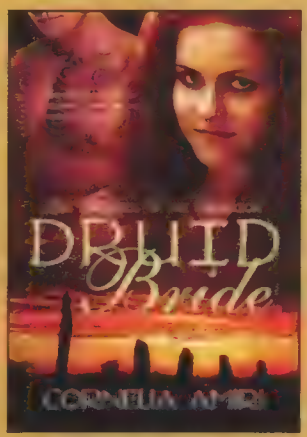
☐ I want to pay via Paypal
(This option can also be used for credit card purchases even if you don't have Paypal--we will send an invoice to you via email.)

Subscribe online through our website at
www.rofmag.com
or by calling (707) 595-4738
Monday through Friday 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. PST

From the pen of The Celtic Romance Queen
Cornelia Amiri

Is the love Gwydion and Seren share strong enough to overcome the social barrier between an immortal god and a mortal woman?

The Wolf and the Druidess
eBook ISBN: 9781615722464
Print ISBN: 9781615722471

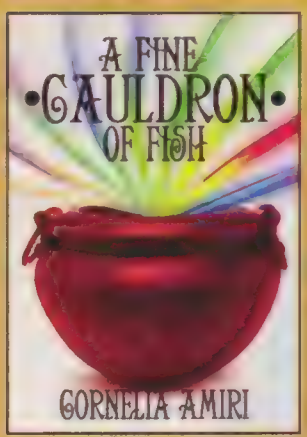


She carried the seed of rebirth. So what had fallen would rise again."

Druid Bride
eBook ISBN: 9781615720897
Print ISBN: 9781615720903

With one goal in mind, she uses magic, battles, disguises, and skills of seduction to take the crown as sole ruler.

Queen Of Kings
eBook ISBN: 9781926704210
Print ISBN: 9781926704302



On the Isle of Man you can find vampiric sprits known as the leanan sidhe, dwelling in sea caves where they keep a red cauldron filled with the blood of their human lovers. Mortal men cannot resist them. They enchant and enslave by their beauty alone.

A Fine Cauldron of Fish
eBook ISBN: 9781897559642
Print ISBN: 9781926640693

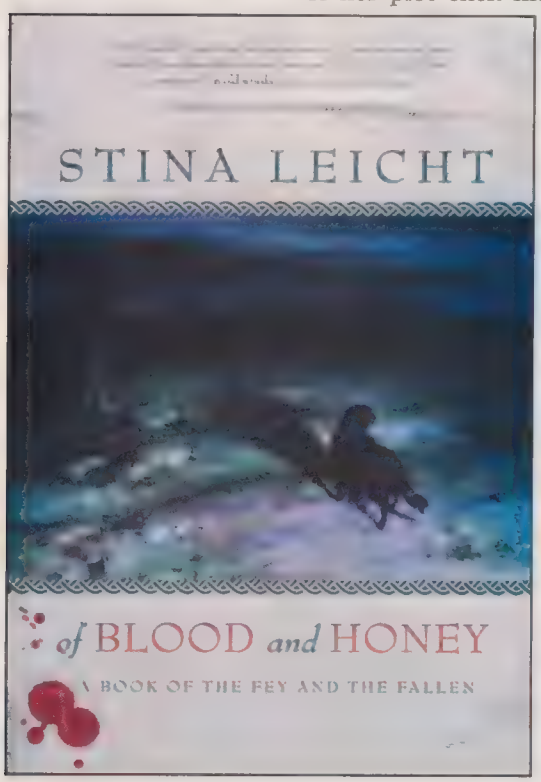
www.CelticRomanceQueen.com

Books

by Paul Witcover and Elizabeth Bear

Stina Leicht takes some of the most overused tropes in urban fantasy and revitalizes them in ***Of Blood and Honey*** **(Night Shade Books, trade paperback, 304 pp., $14.99, ISBN: 978-1-5978-0213-0),** an exceptionally strong first novel. Evil fallen angels: check. Fetching Fey folk: check. Ignorant half-breed hero: check. Hunky shape-shifters: check. Secret Catholic order of assassin priests: check. It's kind of a wonder, really, that a novel featuring these familiar elements could be as fresh as this one. But Leicht not only pulls it off, she makes it look easy.

Leicht brings observant description and sensitive, even passionate, character-building to both the realistic and the fantastic parts of her book. In fact, her approach to the fantastic is not as something opposed to or apart from reality but instead as just another, perhaps deeper, aspect of it. Leicht exposes this deeper aspect with artful precision through the mundane details of her main characters' lives; there are revelatory moments, yes, sudden and violent and strange, but there is also a slowly expanding sense of enchantment and of uncanny import as the pieces of her plot click inexorably into place, forcing her characters to adjust in painful ways to a reality that has changed, changed utterly...and yet hasn't really changed at all. It is what it always was: only more so.



Leicht's setting is inspired: Northern Ireland and England during the early to late 1970s, as the so-called Troubles escalated increasingly into naked terrorism on the one hand and totalitarian-style oppression, with a heavy dose of racism, on the other. Not a shining moment in the history of either side—though fortunately saner heads seem to have prevailed...for now. Leicht does more than re-create those ugly and dangerous times of protest marches a razor's edge from riot, mass arrests, arbitrary police actions, prison hunger strikes, IRA bomb blasts and bank robberies. Through her vividly realized characters, she inhabits them.

Chief among these characters is Liam Kelly, a young man we first glimpse lying facedown in the street with a British soldier's boot on his back. The year is 1971. Caught up in a riot, innocent yet unwilling to implicate anyone else, both out of sympathy to the cause and for fear of seeming less than manly to his girlfriend, Mary Kate, a staunch republican, he is unjustly sentenced to prison. There he is brutally and repeatedly raped by one of the guards. But that is merely one of the humiliations he endures. Needless to say, he emerges a changed man.

And changed not just by those horrific experiences, but by a frightening inner savagery whose sudden upwelling is, if anything, even more horrific. Liam learns that he carries a beast within him, a slavering beast that will fight to emerge... and, once emerged, will kill without mercy or compunction. Liam, a good Catholic boy at heart, struggles to keep this demon leashed—but his fundamental misunderstanding of what is going on within him, and how that relates to events in the outer world around him, dooms his attempts at control to failure.

Leicht is not at all coy about filling readers in on Liam's heritage. We learn very quickly that his father is one of the fairy folk—a being known as Bran; whether this is the Bran of Celtic mythology, or some aspect of him, is unclear. Bran loves Liam's mother, Kathleen, with the absurd obsessive devotion of his kind. Though he cares for his son, he has sworn an oath to Kathleen never to reveal himself to Liam, and such oaths, as we know, are binding on the Fey. So it is that readers are aware of Liam's half-breed nature, and the source, presumably, of the beast barely caged beneath his skin, while Liam is still beset with denial, shame, fear, and ignorance.

We also learn through Bran of a war between the Fey and fallen angels—a war that parallels or mirrors that taking place between the IRA and the English army, its allies in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and various loyalist paramilitary groups. Indeed, the fallen angels seem to have infiltrated the British and British-allied troops; one red-capped devil in particular seems intent upon harming anyone associated with Bran. Unfortunately, Bran's vow to Kathleen prevents him from taking a more active role in his son's welfare.

This aspect of Leicht's plot is a weak link, and I wish she had stressed more forcibly and frequently why Bran keeps Liam at arm's length. The reason does not translate into any recognizable human motivation; it's a Fey thing—we just

don't understand. And Leicht doesn't make it easier for us to understand this apparent neglect by keeping her focus so resolutely on the human side of things. That pays off for her dramatically in many respects, but not this one. Nor is Kathleen's decision to keep her son ignorant of his parentage believable beyond a certain point.

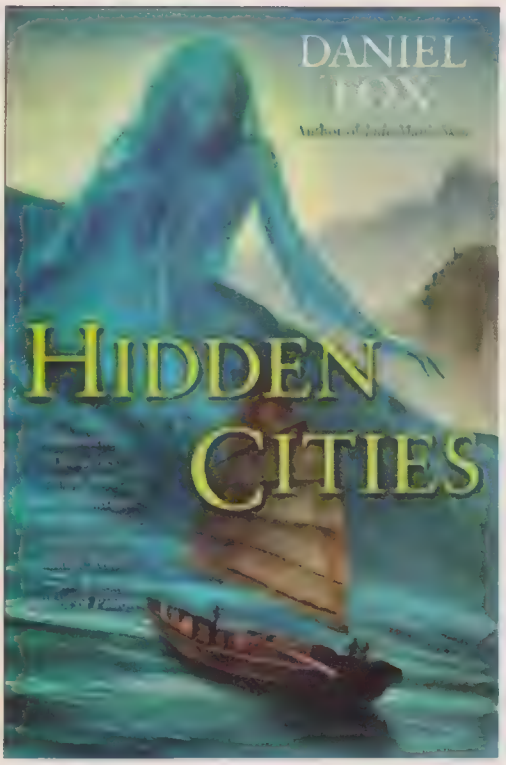
Liam is not the only one suffering because of a fundamental misunderstanding. His parish priest, Father Murray, is similarly afflicted. Murray is more than what he seems; he belongs to a secret branch of the Church devoted to hunting down and destroying the fallen angels. But though he knows of Liam's parentage, thanks to Kathleen's confession, he is not convinced that Liam is evil; or, rather, he believes his inherent evil potential may be offset by a good Catholic upbringing. Well, hope springs eternal, I suppose.

In their blinkered zeal, Murray and his fellows lump the Fey in with the fallen angels, hunting and slaughtering both with equal efficiency. Which is unfortunate, since the Fey could be valuable allies in the struggle—a struggle that neither Fey nor human, acting alone, can hope to win. But Murray does not find it easy to accept a truth that goes against his training and his Church—not even when the emergence of Liam's dark side marks him, in the eyes of the Church, as another demon to be destroyed.

Leicht is excellent in paralleling the fantastic and realistic elements of her novel. As Liam's monstrous alter-ego becomes more prominent, so, too, does he become increasingly radicalized, moving from an IRA sympathizer to an active member of the army. Liam's unit is characterized by a camaraderie so close-knit as to almost be incestuous. There is a creepy undercurrent of manipulation and paranoia that comes to overshadow this part of Liam's life...and to spill over into the rest of it. Similarly, Liam's relationship with Mary Kate, first his girl friend, then his wife, echoes that of his mother and the father he has never known...and the stepfather he has known all too well. This is a novel in which lines are blurred, erased, and things kept separate bleed together: people, feelings, realities.

As events approached their climax, I felt that the book became more conventional, to its detriment. Evidently, a series is planned, featuring Liam and Murray as two unlikely collaborators, like Rick Blaine and Louis Renault, and it seemed to me that Leicht left a lot of fingerprints on the resolution of her plot in order to make that partnership happen. I don't have anything against the idea of a series featuring these two men, by the way; it's more the manner of getting there, than the destination itself, that I had a problem with. Still, this is an accomplished debut from a highly talented young author. **Reviewed by Paul Witcover.**

With ***Hidden Cities*** **(Del Rey, trade paperback, 432 pp., $15.00, ISBN: 978-0-3455-0303-9).** Daniel Fox brings his Books of Stone and Water trilogy to a triumphant close—and leaves the door open for further adventures set in his alternate China and Taiwan. Fox brings a distinct literary sensibility to his work. His prose is leisurely, dense, mellifluous, lyrical; his method is to focus intently on one particular character at a time—over the course of the trilogy, the number of point-of-view characters has mushroomed—and then drill down deep into that character using exterior action as a springboard to interior examination. Sometimes we are given the character's thoughts directly, as in a stream-of-consciousness-type interior monologue, but more often we follow along as a discursive, allusive, analytic process plays out across the page, a process that may reflect the mazy movements of the character's own reflections but seems more likely to be the unapologetic maundering intrusions of the omniscient narrator himself. The benefit of this is that it gives readers extraordinary access to, and insight into, the various characters, and thematic links between them; the drawback is that at times it becomes smothering, and readers may yearn to escape from all this deeply self-conscious interiority into a little shallow action. It would be easy to parody Fox's style; and at times he comes close to it himself, writing as if his novel were not so much a collection of scenes as of character sketches strung together. Nevertheless, he makes it work more often than not—all in all, it's an impressive display of craftsmanship. I mention this aspect of his work because I think whether or not readers respond to these novels depends to a significant degree on how they respond to his frankly mannered style.



A warning: some spoilers necessarily follow.

Fox's alternate world is an ancient China whose young emperor, Chien Hua, has been hounded from the mainland by the armies of a rebellious general, Tunghai Wai, and has taken refuge on Taiwan—here called Taishu. Only two things prevent Tunghai from pursuing the emperor across the strait, both of which emerged in the previous novels in the trilogy, *Dragon in Chains* and *Jade Man's Skin*: these are, as you might expect, a great dragon, and, as you might not, an all-but-immaterial goddess. The dragon and the goddess are ancient enemies; for time out of mind, the dragon was bound in mystical chains of iron and ink, and held in ensorcelled slumber beneath the waters of the strait by the magic of the goddess. In *Dragon in Chains*, the dragon broke free and escaped to wreak his revenge upon anyone foolish enough to sail the strait, whether fisherman or soldier or refugee. The goddess, though she cannot return him to captivity, does have the power to protect individual ships and people; she does this through flesh-and-blood vessels she temporarily possesses—without a human host, she is herself all but helpless in the material world.

What keeps the dragon from simply killing every human being not under the protection of the goddess—for she cannot be everywhere—is a young boy named Han. Han, very much against his will, has had inscribed upon his skin mystical tattoos that bind him to the dragon and allow him to influence its behavior to a degree. The boy cannot be free of the dragon; the dragon cannot be free of the boy—though the dragon strives mightily to throw him off, metaphorically speaking. And not so metaphorically, for the boy has learned to ride the dragon.

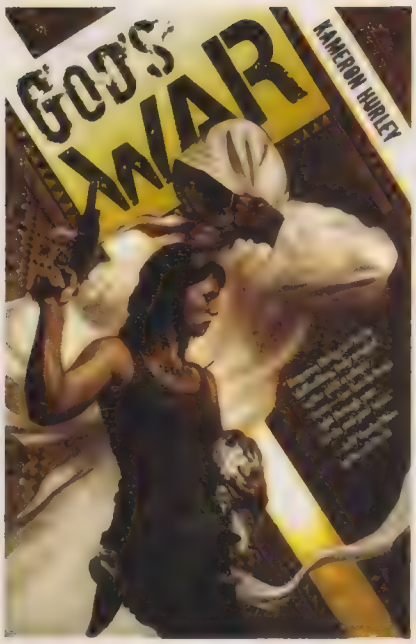
Meanwhile, dragon and goddess are not the only sources of supernatural power in this world. The mineral of jade has extraordinary powers that it confers slowly upon humans through prolonged exposure. Traditionally, only the emperor has enjoyed the great strength, speed, and iron-like skin that comes from prolonged exposure. It has made Chien literally superhuman—though for all his exterior hardness of body, his soul remains innocent, even naïve: he is no match for his wily enemies, or his even more wily mother, the dowager empress. But recently, a peasant jade carver from the mountains, Yu Shan, has manifested similar abilities to those of the emperor. Rather than being killed for the crime of lèse majesté, Yu has been accorded the rare privilege of friendship with the emperor, who seems to see him as a kind of brother. Some traditionalists, such as the dowager empress, look askance at this highly inappropriate friendship.

But that is nothing compared to how they look at his relationship with Mei Feng, a young fisher girl whom Chien takes as his concubine and who becomes pregnant with his first child. Mei is a down-to-earth girl, a salutary influence upon the young emperor—but she is sophisticated enough to know that there are those who mean her and the emperor harm. Enemies closer than Tunghai Wai. When the emperor's forces retake the mainland city of Santung, one of these enemies, Ping Wen, is dispatched to be its governor—the idea being that he can get up to less mischief on the far side of the strait.

Ping Wen, however, is a wily survivor of just such courtly machinations, and is not prepared to accept his exile so meekly. Santung has the reputation of being easy to take yet impossible to hold; already, it seems, the forces of Tunghai, so recently expelled, thanks in no small part to the vengeance of the dragon, are regrouping to counterattack. Now Ping pursues a two-fold strategy to survive: he will strike with the weapons of a new technology against both Tunghai and the dragon; and he will use the power of the goddess, and of a magic as ancient and more mysterious, to return the dragon to its prison beneath the waves. Then he will turn his attention to Taishu and the imperial annoyance waiting there. Such is the climax toward which the characters of this gripping novel, human and otherwise, are inexorably drawn.

The above gives only the merest taste of the layers upon layers of intrigue and densely woven, emotionally fraught relationships with which Fox complicates—if not overcomplicates—his plot. What cuts through all these accumulated complications, and the at-times annoying self-absorption of his characters, is Fox's brilliant evocation of his imagined world. In a weird way, the dragon, the jade, the goddess—all of these finely wrought details are beside the point; they are meaningful to the plot, yes, but Fox's achievement here does not rest upon them or upon any other magic beyond the ordinary kind that is to be found in the masterful manipulation of words. **Reviewed by Paul Witcover.**

Kameron Hurley's debut novel ***God's War*** **(Night Shade Books, trade paperback, 288 pp.,, $14.99, 978-1-5978-0214-7)** is what I think we're supposed to call a "promising debut." It's a science fantasy set in an Islamic future of seemingly casual space travel, where the inhabitants of one particular world live in a state of ceaseless war. There are two main warring nations and a number of allied or uneasily neutral countries that are either mentioned, or provide the backgrounds of various secondary characters.



The world is the real star of this book: it's a palpably hot, dusty, barely habitable place, a nightmare of ceaseless war and collapsing social institutions reflecting the fact that just about every man between the ages of sixteen and forty is either at the front, or has come home in pieces. It seems like I've been reading a lot of stories lately about unending, generations-long, stagnant wars. I wonder what in the zeitgeist could be provoking that?

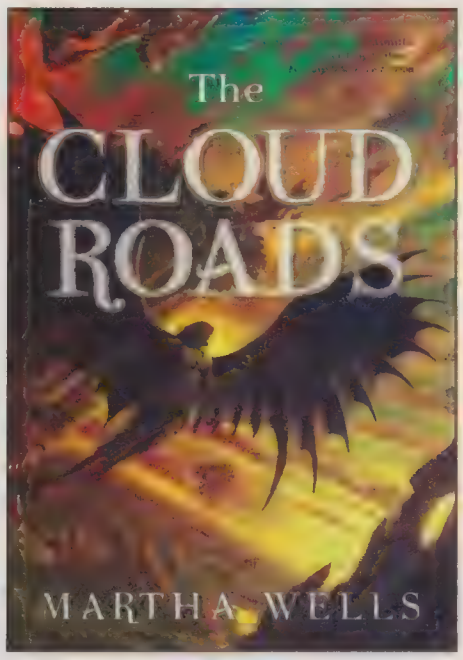
Hurley provides some truly weird stuff—the shapeshifters are pretty standard magic-users, though the mucous is a nice disgusting touch, but the magician-mediated mutant bugs that make up most of the technology are really pleasantly gross. Somehow, this book never slides into the exhausting grossness I associate with some other writers of this kind of science fantasy, such as China Miéville, Jeffrey Ford, and Jeff VanderMeer. It's never revolting for its own sake, but instead maintains a kind of le Carreian grittiness.

It's le Carreian, too, in its utter disregard for any kind of conventional ethics. All's fair in love and war, and the protagonists—mercenaries Rhys and Nyx—are only slightly less horrible than everybody else—or maybe not. They're crippled people, emotionally and in some ways physically. Hurley does an excellent job of drawing her characters and their various very different cultures in sharp enough strokes that even though this book has a somewhat unwieldy cast and a seemingly endless series of double-crosses, I never got too confused about who was who.

There's an awful lot to like here. Unfortunately, Hurley's primary protagonist is not one of those things. Nyx is a really thoroughly repulsive human being, without even the balm of competence to make her a little likable. She's self-absorbed, violent, and sociopathic—and she causes most of her own problems through greed or incompetence. Her sole virtue is found in her toughness. Rhys, her foil, is easier to swallow, but feels a little unformed, almost as if in contrast to Nyx he mostly stands out as being made of the things Nyx isn't. The book feels as if it starts very slowly, and there's a lot of very confusing plot where it's not really clear exactly what is going on or why. Of course, that too is le Carreian. The book remains thematically strong, however, and I suspect it will stay with me for a while. **Reviewed by Elizabeth Bear.**

Also from Night Shade Books is Martha Wells's ***The Cloud Roads*** **(trade paperback, 300 pp., $14.99, 978-1-5978-0216-1)**, a much more traditional second-world fantasy, but also featuring shapeshifters. Her protagonist Moon inhabits a world where the sapient races are not defined by anything as insignificant as skin color or the shape of facial features. Instead, they are extremely divergent—different species, with capabilities as different as kangaroos and ostriches. When we meet Moon, he's living a settled life with a tribe of people who somewhat resemble him—but he has a secret.

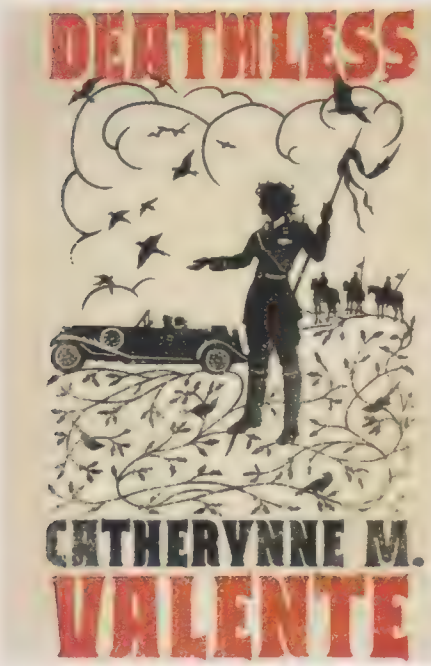
He can grow wings, transform into something that Wells describes as a sort of draconian humanoid, and fly. This gives him an unfortunate resemblance to the insectile Fell, an evil race who attacks the other tribes. Unfortunately—and inevitably—one of the tribespeople witnesses his transformation, and Moon must flee for his life. This proves fortuitous, however, because he then meets up with a member of his own species, who desperately needs his help against those self-same Fell.



Wells is a seasoned writer, and her prose is clean and fluid. The world of this novel is inventive, though sometimes shallowly enough treated that it feels like a children's book—I was reminded of the many strange races of Oz, met once and then passed over—but Moon himself was my biggest stumbling block. Specifically, he's supposed to be in his thirties, but he reads like an adolescent.

I also have a little ingrained problem with the Evil Species trope, although Wells pulls off a couple of nice undermines in this one. All in all, fast-paced and fun. **Reviewed by Elizabeth Bear.**

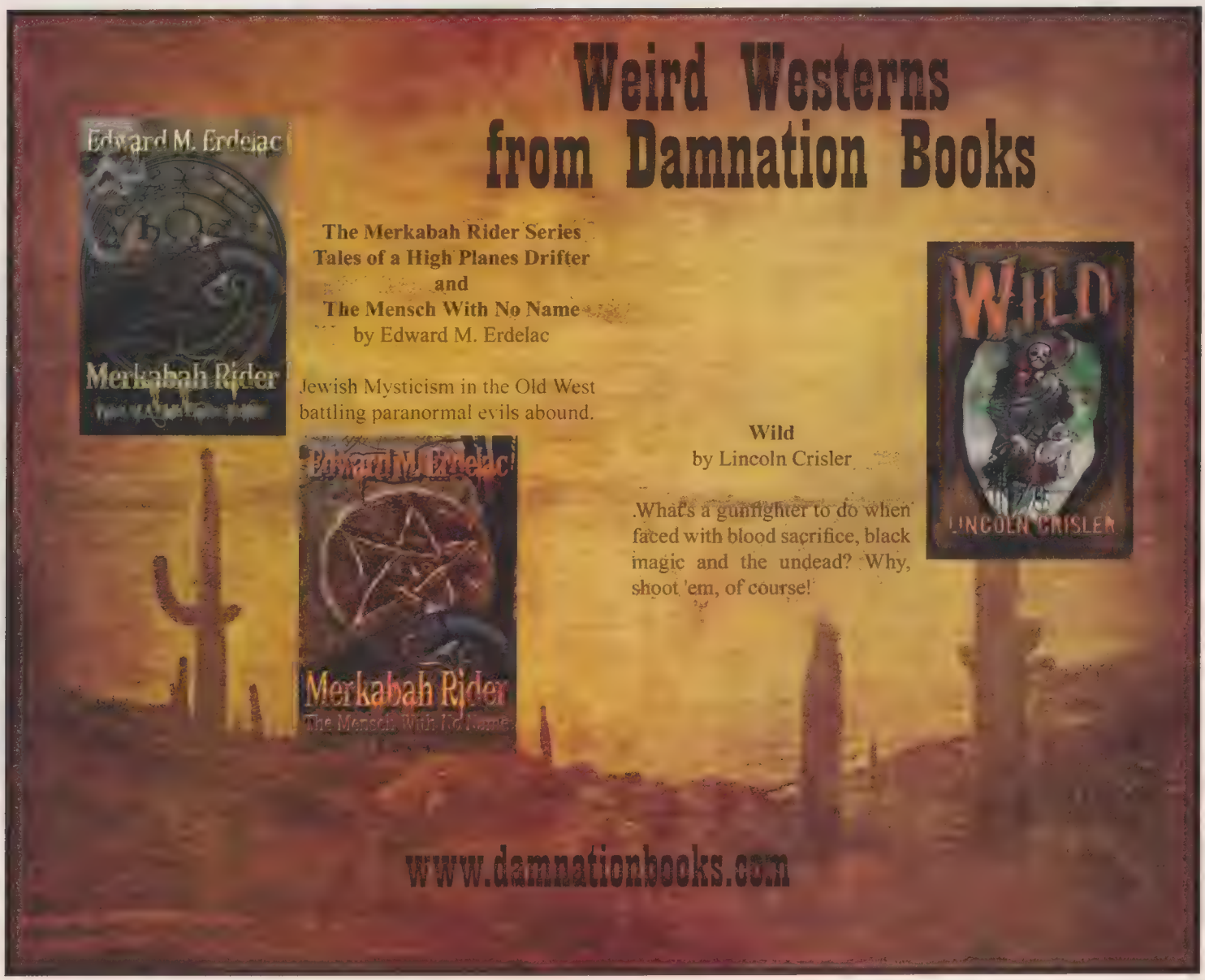
Catherynne M. Valente's heralded ***Deathless*** **(Tor, trade hardcover, 352 pp., $24.99, 978-0-7653-2630-0)** is not fast-paced, but it is often mesmerizing. Valente has been making



a name for herself as a fabulist and a master of cadenced prose, and in this book she brings her particular skills to Russian fairytales—updating them to encompass revolution and then the Stalinist Soviet Union, up until the siege of Leningrad. It's an excellent book in many ways: Valente is endlessly inventive, from the kommisariat of house-elves to the updating of the three steeds of Koschei the Deathless into sleek touring cars. The narrative often captures the meter and rhythm of fairytales just so, and the description of the siege—one of modern history's great horrors—is chilling and breathtaking. She nails it.

Unfortunately, the book is not structurally as strong as the sum of its parts. It feels curiously disjointed, and the frequent changes in tone and voice and narrative style increase this tendency. I wasn't at all certain of the purpose of the extended parable of the village at the end, except to provide a place for a lot of Russian history jokes.

These are minor complaints, however: what the book lacks in narrative coherence it more than makes up for in sheer beauty, and in its own way, it's as successfully and lovingly world-built as Hurley's novel, above. **Reviewed by Elizabeth Bear.**



Gaming Reviews

by Matt London and Matt Stags

***Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds*, by Capcom, published by Capcom; ESRB rating: T, $59.99; Formats available: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360; Format reviewed: PlayStation 3.**

Crossovers, by their very nature, have to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek. These creative mergers, where the characters of one fictional universe encounter those of another, have a history of popularity with fans, but are often met with bemused eye-rolls from the critical establishment.

Video games have played in this realm more often than one might think. There was an Alien vs. Predator game long before there was a film. The Super Smash Bros. franchise pits characters from all of Nintendo's big licenses against each other.

Back in the 1990's, Capcom, known for the quintessential fighting series *Street Fighter*, sought to capitalize on the popularity of crossovers. X-Men and Marvel Super Heroes fighting games were already popular. The next logical step seemed to be a merger. Thus, *Marvel vs. Capcom*.

The pinnacle of the series came ten years ago with *Marvel vs. Capcom 2: A New Wave of Heroes*, which added dozens of characters to the mix. With over fifty playable characters, *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* kept gamers busy for a decade. There have been no additions to this popular series—until now.

Marvel vs. Capcom 3: Fate of Two Worlds allows players to select a team of three characters from the Marvel and Capcom universes and battle other teams tournament-style a la Street Fighter. The game is accessible to all skill levels. If you want to mash buttons and jiggle the joystick, chances are you will still do pretty well. If you learn the special moves (which are basically the same for every character) and figure out how to block, you will win. If you memorize the multi-hit combos that require complex combinations of perfectly timed button strikes, well, you have a lot more free time than I do.

If you do want to learn the combos, there is a new single-player setting called Mission Mode, in which the game provides you with instructions on how to execute the special moves, and a stationary target to use as target practice. Even with instructions and unlimited attempts, completing these missions is still extremely difficult if you are not a seasoned pro. It is all in the timing.

To make up for the challenge of Mission Mode, *Marvel vs. Capcom 3*'s main arcade mode is incredibly easy. On standard difficulty, most players will beat the game on their first try.

The graphics in the new MvC feature fully rendered three-dimensional characters, whereas earlier games had traditional cell animation. Whether this is an improvement is a matter of taste. The backgrounds in each level are busy and beautiful and an amazing improvement.

To make the point short, this game is fun. It has always been fun. It is still fun. But is fun enough? Games this ripe for amazing story beats only come once in a generation (MvC4 might not be released until 2021) and yet there is almost zero story. The opening movie is simply a fight between Marvel characters and Capcom characters with no explanation of how or why they have merged in one world. A majority of the plot is described in the manual. Each character receives a unique ending (unlike the previous installment which barely had one ending), but the endings consist of only two still frames and a few lines of text each.

I don't want to throw too much jaded fan girth around, but some of the character choices are just bizarre. Cyclops, Cable, Venom, and the Fantastic Four are all missing from the Marvel side. Although Zero from the Mega Man X series makes an appearance, Mega Man himself is absent. Having Zero and no Mega Man would be like putting Faramir in a fighting game but leaving out Aragorn.

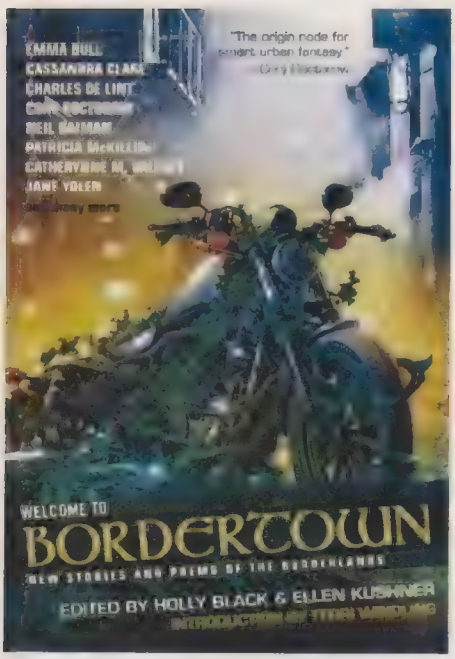
If players want to know how bad they are at a game, they should check out the online mode, where they will be beaten to a pulp (when the online server actually connects them to another human) over and over again. **Reviewed by Matt London.**

***Dragon Age II*, by BioWare, published by Electronic Arts; ESRB rating: M, $59.99; Formats available: Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Mac OS X; Format reviewed: Xbox 360.**

Continued on page 98

by Elizabeth Bear

Terri Windling and Mark Alan Arnold's "Bordertown" books are practically synonymous with urban fantasy to fans of a certain generation. They've fallen off the radar of younger readers in the last ten or fifteen years, but for many people in my cohort—the ones who didn't stumble across Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* or Charles de Lint's *Moonheart* first—they were our introduction to this wonderful new kind of fantasy that we'd only seen previously in Peter S. Beagle's stylistically prophetic *A Fine and Private Place*. The heyday of Bordertown encompassed four anthologies and three novels. It was one of the great shared worlds of all time—leather and lace, cruel elves and hot motorcycles—it was ineluctably '80s.



It helped establish the urban fantasy genre as an independent and thriving concern, and then it ended.

Thirteen years later, Bordertown is back, with ***Welcome to Bordertown* (Random House, trade hardcover, 544 pp., $19.99, 978-0-3758-6705-7),** edited now by Holly Black and Ellen Kushner, and this is a worthy entry in the series. Featuring old writers and new, it does a creditable job of updating Bordertown to the present day, and even brings in a few unexpected new twists.

The premise of Bordertown, as the alert reader will already have gathered, is that a city exists on the edge of things between fairy and the real world. It's a haven for outcasts and halfway people—somewhat anarchic, a little twisted, definitely weird. It's populated largely by people you'd not find out of place in a Scandal video circa 1984, and you can get to Bordertown, if you really need to, but it's not easy. And if you do get there, staying alive may not be easy either. But it just might be better than what you've left behind.

For the newest installment, the authors started from the premise that the Ways between Bordertown and Earth had closed unexpectedly—thirteen years ago on Earth, thirteen *days* ago in Bordertown—and just as unexpectedly reopened. The table of contents is a well-balanced mix of old names and new—Neil Gaiman, Cory Doctorow; Emma Bull, Nalo Hopkinson—and the stories, songs, and poems are very true to the feel of old Bordertown.

The quality of the stories and verse varies, as you might expect. For me, one of the strongest entries was the Windling/Kushner collaboration, also titled "Welcome to Bordertown," about a girl who came to town just before the Ways closed, the fairy-stolen ethnographer she meets there, and the brother who arrives after the Ways reopen, hoping to bring her back. It's a nice transition, and a nice set piece, and if the ending is a little pat, well, it is a YA anthology and sometimes it's nice to get the ending you expect. I also very much liked Emma Bull's "Incunabulum." I've said before that every writer only gets one amnesia story in a lifetime, and this is a good one. Alaya Dawn Johnson's "A Prince of Thirteen Days" is a beautiful, Pygmalion-like tale of statuary love.

Janni Lee Simner's "Crossings" is another excellent one, in which two girls go out looking for the kind of bad-boy boyfriends you find in a lot of modern urban fantasy (the sort where the protagonist's possibly apocryphal tramp stamp features heavily on the cover)... and don't get what they want. A witty story, and one that beautifully plays off the expectations of the seminal urban fantasy against that of the post-Buffy genre explosion. Tim Pratt's "Our Stars, Our Selves" is an exceptional short story that takes as its heart that old adage about life being what happens while we make other plans. It's also ironic, funny, and deeply satisfying, featuring intertwined plotlines revolving around an elf-prince who is trying to glamour a die-hard lesbian into falling in love with him, and an astronomer deeply bitter that she can only make a living by astrology...which, here in Bordertown, works annoyingly well.

I experienced more ambivalent reactions to Nalo Hopkinson's "Ours Is the Prettiest," with its lyrical language and focus on cultures outside the Borderlands mainstream, but was left uncomfortable with the abusive protagonist and the plot felt arbitrary. Stronger was Christopher Barzak's "We Do Not Come in Peace," a compelling story about sacrifice and staying true to

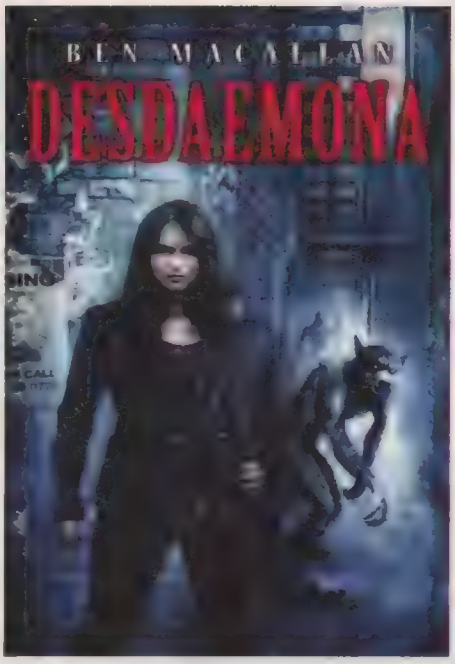
yourself whatever the cost.

I'm not usually a huge fan of de Lint, but I really liked his story in this book, "A Tangle of Green Men," in which fairy intrudes into the mundane world. It didn't feel like a Borderlands story, though, but rather like a Charles de Lint story with some Borderlands tacked on to the end.

Welcome to Bordertown also contains a number of songs and poems, the standouts being Patricia McKillip's "Cruel Sister" and Delia Sherman's "The Wall."

Sweeping from the roots of urban fantasy to the modern era, my other book for this bimester is Ben Macallan's ***Desdaemona*** **(Solaris UK, mass market paperback, 432 pp., $7.99, ISBN 978-1-9075-1963-5).** This is true modern urban fantasy, complete with beautiful dangerous women, lords of Hell and Earth, chase scenes, fight scenes, unrelenting action, and the mystery of a disappearing girl.

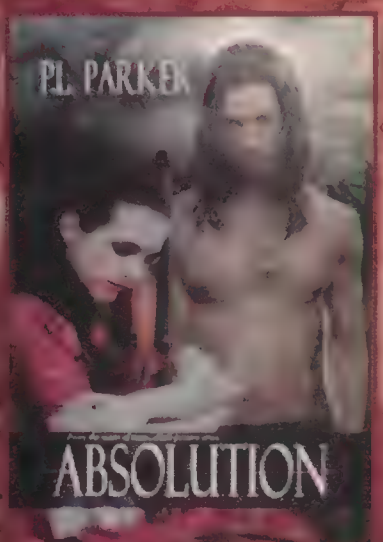
It's a bit unusual for urban fantasy in that the protagonist is a boy rather than a girl, and he's on the run from his supernatural past. Literally—when we meet Jordan he's just about to throw away his few scraps of precarious security to rescue a runaway girl from a banshee and a pack of werewolves, and things only get worse from there. He then falls in with a daemon—a mortal woman who has traded her service away for the power of an immortal—and is maneuvered well against his better judgment into looking for her sister, who has also taken it on the lam after an ill-advised assignation with the scion and pride of one of the major supernatural families.



This launches Jordan into just the world he's been trying to avoid for untold years, and into a sort of ultra-fast-paced, supernatural Dennis Lehane novel populated by mystic crime families, unholy alliances, and frequent sneak attacks—all leading up to a plot twist that didn't actually catch me by surprise only because I am old and crafty and wise to the ways of authors.

Macallan is a pseudonym for seasoned fantasy and thriller writer Chaz Brenchley, so this is one of the better first novels you'll find floating around. The prose is impeccable, his protagonist a perfectly believable almost-immortal seventeen-year-old, and the book's theme of avoidance of the inevitable nicely developed.

Absolution
by P.L. Parker



For years, travelers in the French Vosges Mountains heard the wailing of a woman echo in the hollows. Her cries went unbidden. No one was brave enough to seek out the source. Over time, the screams lessened, then stopped. Eventually, even the memories slipped away, forgotten.

Six centuries later, two over-eager research assistants find and release the young half vampire, Chloe—unaware of events they unwittingly unleash with her.

Far away, other forces are aware of her awakening. Zaccarius, greatest of all the Slayers, is sent by the Council of Nine to seek out Chloe, determine her worth and render justice. Enticed by her purity and innocence, he becomes her protector. However, Jochad, the Dark Master and his army of evil vampires are eager to claim Chloe.

In the ensuing battle, Zaccarius falls beneath Jochad's army. To save her lover, Chloe must make a choice. Ancient and dying, Jochad needs her blood to reanimate. His ultimatum—her blood or Zaccarius' life.

http://www.plparker.com

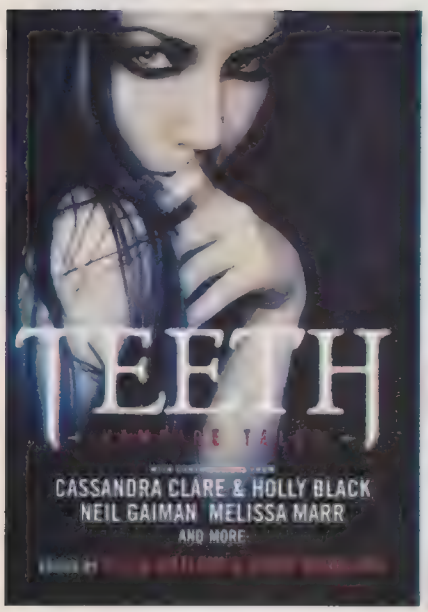
Young Adult Fiction

by Michael M. Jones

***The Iron Thorn*, by Caitlin Kittredge (Delacorte Press, hardcover, 492 pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-3857-3829-3).**

What do a clockwork house in a steampunk setting, the Cthulhu Mythos, the Fae, and a girl engineer all have in common? They factor into Kittredge's endlessly entertaining YA debut, a delightful juxtaposition of unlikely elements and high adventure. When Aoife Grayson receives a plea for help from her long-lost brother, she runs away from the strict school she calls home, accompanied by her best friend and guided by a dashing rogue. Encountering airship pirates, flesh-eating ghouls, untrustworthy Fae and more, Aoife must unlock the secrets of her family, even as her world is torn apart by betrayal and revelations. With its unique blend of steampunk science, eldritch horror, dark magic, and Gothic atmosphere, this book draws you like a shoggoth's tentacle and doesn't let go.

***Teeth*, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling (HarperCollins, trade paperback, 480 pp., $9.99, ISBN 978-0-0619-3514-5).**



Twenty top-notch authors explore the concept of the vampire in stories and poetry, reintroducing elements of danger, mystique, allure, and passion to a topic seemingly bled thin in recent years. From those who love vampires to those who hunt them, from those attracted by immortality to those seeking it, drawing inspiration from a dozen different vampire myths, this collection is filled with gems. Some stories explore love, others life and death, others family and friendship. Freedom and imprisonment, change and stagnation, the duality of the vampiric nature is in full bloom here. This collection masterfully conveys the complexity of the concept, with nary a clunker to be found, and is a must-have for any vampire fan out there.

***Rage*, by Jackie Morse Kessler (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, trade paperback, 228 pp., $8.99, ISBN 978-0-5474-4528-1).**

Filled with anger, obsessed with maintaining control, Melissa Miller cuts herself for a multitude of reasons. The object of scorn and derision, and targeted by bullies, she's the butt of a vicious prank which tips her over the edge, prompting her to accept the role of War, one of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Now the embodiment of human aggression, she struggles to understand her new role even as she tries to balance it with her normal life. If she can't cope with her own feelings, the human race will suffer. Like *Hunger* before it, *Rage* tackles a vital teen issue with delicacy and intelligence without preaching. Raw, visceral, pulling no punches, this story strikes home like a razor blade. It's unforgettable, heart wrenching, and enlightening.

***Tiger's Curse*, by Colleen Houck (Sterling Publishing, hardcover, 448 pp., $17.95, ISBN 978-1-4027-8403-3).**

In search of a summer job, Kelsey Hayes takes a temporary position with a visiting circus, responsible for helping the animal trainer. She immediately bonds with Ren, an unusually intelligent white tiger. Soon, she learns that Ren is actually a centuries-old Indian prince suffering from a curse, and that she may be the only one

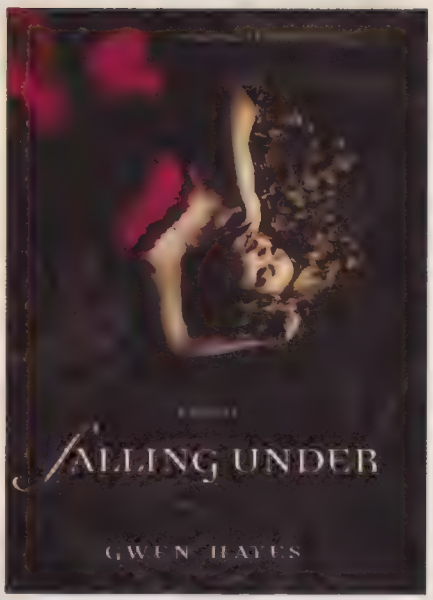
able to help him break the curse and permanently regain his human form. Their quest takes them back to India, where they brave all manner of dangers. But will their mutual attraction make the job easier, or will it tear them apart? This is a treat for the senses, with lush details leaping off the page at every turn. Steeped in Indian culture and mythology, it's an unusual and engaging story.

***Angel Burn*, by L. A. Weatherly (Candlewick Press, hardcover, 464 pp., $17.99, ISBN 978-0-7636-5652-2).**

Alex has spent most of his seventeen years hunting angels, extra-dimensional energy vampires who feed on humans and leave illness in their wake. As the angels flood into our world, their influence rapidly grows, inspiring a new religion, with only a very few realizing the awful truth and fighting back. Willow is a psychic teen whose unique heritage holds the key to stopping the angels, so they target her for death. In a last-ditch effort to survive and save humanity, Alex and Willow desperately team up, fleeing cross-country in search of allies. As they race against the clock, the peril intensifies, leading to one electrifying confrontation after another, and an explosive climax. High-octane action meets newfound love in this adrenaline-fueled thriller.

***Falling Under*, by Gwen Hayes (New American Library, trade paperback, 324 pp., $9.99, ISBN 978-0-4512-3268-7).**

The night Theia Alderson watches a burning man fall from the sky, her sheltered life is changed for good. Now she spends her days trying to understand the new boy in town, Haden, who adopts a much more capricious and wickedly seductive attitude when he also shows up in her dreams. Alternately attracted and repelled, Theia falls for him, even after discovering his true nature and intentions toward her. She's the target of an otherworldly plot, with life and soul at stake. Can she win free, even with the help of her friends, or will she be altered irrevocably? Dark and compelling, this tale of forbidden love maintains its individuality thanks to engaging supporting characters and a memorable concept.



***After Midnight*, by Lynn Viehl (Flux, trade paperback, 336 pp., $9.95, ISBN 978-0-7387-2632-8).**

When Catlyn Youngblood and her brothers move to the tiny town of Lost Lake, Florida, she hopes that this will be the end of their constant moving for a while. Unfortunately, the siblings get a cool welcome from their new neighbors, for reasons unknown. It all changes when Catlyn has a chance meeting with the mysterious Jesse Raven one night, and they forge a clandestine friendship that soon deepens. Unfortunately, their romance is forbidden by both families. Jesse Raven is a vampire, while the Youngbloods are descended from one of history's greatest hunters, and there's bad blood between the two clans. As Jesse and Catlyn defy those who would keep them apart, more secrets come to light, potentially dooming their love. Coming off as *Twilight* crossed with *Romeo and Juliet*, this YA debut for Viehl has a lot of appeal and some genuinely surprising twists.

***A Long, Long Sleep*, by Anna Sheehan (Candlewick Press, hardcover, 352 pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-0-7636-5260-9).**

Rosalinda Fitzroy has just woken from sixty-two years in stasis, only to discover that everyone she knew is dead, and society has changed greatly. As the last member of a once-powerful family, she'll inherit the world's most powerful company when she comes of age. Until then, she has to adjust and rediscover herself, free at last from her domineering parents and their unreal expectations, free to pursue her own dreams. But with an unstoppable killer stalking her, that freedom may be short-lived. As she struggles to stay alive, the mystery of her past unfolds, revealing romance and tragedy. This futuristic riff on Sleeping Beauty combines an interesting setting with a fast-paced plot and complex characters, making for a satisfying read.

The sequel to the 2009 Game of the Year improves upon the original while retaining the basic formula of all BioWare RPGs. A blank-slate customizable protagonist and a supporting cast of preset template characters fight the forces of evil (and sometimes good). Fans have long embraced the complex stories, sophisticated characters, grand action, and multiple endings of these games.

Unlike past BioWare games, which

featured the colorful high fantasy of *Dungeons & Dragons* in *Baldur's Gate* and the bright swashbuckling science fiction of *Star Wars*, BioWare turned to contemporary gritty high fantasy for *Dragon Age: Origins*. Fans of George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series will feel right at home as blood flies and bodices rip.

BioWare has listened to fan response and improved on the formula of *Dragon Age: Origins*. They replaced the text-heavy dialogue engine with a variant from one of their other hit games, *Mass Effect 2*. The dialogue wheel allows the player to select a variety of options that generally fall into one of three categories: positive, negative, or neutral. Although simplified, this new dialogue system keeps players from accidentally saying the wrong thing. In the first game, often players would accidentally flirt with a companion when they intended to scold them instead. Mistakes like this hurt the quality of the experience for players who care about sculpting the story and their characters as they choose. There are no more talking heads, either. All dialogue and cutscenes are rendered with dynamic camera angles and lighting, smoke effects, close ups, and inserts.

One aspect of the game that *Dragon Age II* does well is force the player to make a gray choice, as opposed to a black and white one. The player can choose to side with the local spellcasters on a political issue, and the hero's wizard sister will like her, but doing so will anger the brooding White-Haired Pretty Boy in the hero's party who has an ax to grind with mages.

Although fun and addictive (and everything players want in an RPG) *Dragon Age II* is not without its faults. Stiff character movement repeatedly breaks suspension of disbelief. The cast frolics in the uncanny valley. In some places the voice acting is good. Other places...not so much. Granted, it is hard to flirt with someone or cry over a dead loved one alone in a dark soundproof room with headphones over your ears.

Dragon Age II is set entirely in one city and the immediate countryside. But the level designers use this innovative choice as an excuse to recycle the same maps throughout the game. At one point I played two dungeon crawl missions in a row through the same cave map.

The story of the game is framed as a tale told by one member of your party ten years after the game begins, following the exploits of a champion as he (or she) rises from destitute refugee to hero of the realm. It is a fun engrossing story with romance, betrayal, and mystery. The companions as archetypes are a bit cliché but well-drawn and empathetic.

Fans of BioWare RPGs, or fantasy in general, will find a new best friend in *Dragon Age II*. It is an easy game to pick up and play but hard to master. The replay value is incredible, considering you can replay the game as a different class or gender and get a totally different experience. It's so good, I want to put down my pen and pick up my controller right now. Adios. **Reviewed by Matt London.**

***Wrath of Ashardalon*, Wizards of the Coast, Board Game, ISBN:978-0-7869-5570-1, $64.99. www.wizards.com.**

Wrath of Ashardalon is the second in a new line of board games from Wizards of the Coast, publishers of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Like its predecessor, *Castle Ravenloft*, Ashardalon is powered by a simplified version of the D&D rules that will be familiar to anyone who has ever played the game.

Ashardalon is designed for one to five players. Each chooses one of five included Heroes, all represented by a plastic figurine and an associated card that explains his or her abilities and special powers. Included are figurines and cards for a Dragonborn Wizard, Human Cleric, Elf Paladin, Half-Orc Rogue, and Dwarf Fighter. Figures chosen, their quests are determined by way of the included Adventure Book, which features thirteen short scenarios of increasing complexity and danger. All of these are set in and around Firestorm Peak, a chain of mountains controlled by a fearsome red dragon and its monstrous allies. Like the adventurers, they're represented by their own figurines and cards.

Ashardalon's dungeon is created anew each game. Players draw interconnecting tiles randomly each turn, mapping out the dungeon as they go. The same goes for the various monsters, traps, and treasures within the dungeon: these are also chosen at random.

Players cast spells, fight monsters, and use magic items by rolling an included twenty-sided die. The player rolls the die, aiming to meet or exceed a stated target number in order to succeed at whatever action they're attempting. Gameplay is fast and simple, but loads of fun, and the random assortment of monsters and traps means that no two games will ever be the same. Cooperation is essential if

the adventurers want to complete their mission and leave Ashardalon's lair alive, making this a good game for families and friends looking for a fun way to spend an evening. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Kingmaker*, Ludibrium Games, Fantasy Role-Playing Adventure, $2.95. www.LudibriumGames.com.**

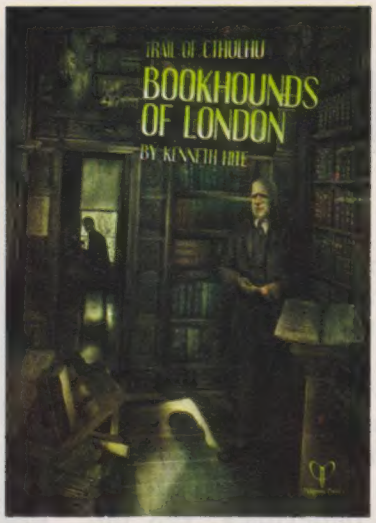
Kingmaker is a short adventure for use with OSRIC, Labyrinth Lord, Swords & Wizardry, or any of the other popular "retro-clone" role-playing systems emulating the older editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and is written for a group of first-level characters.

As *Kingmaker* opens, the adventurers have been hired to escort a caravan of valuable trade goods that also includes the son of a powerful local merchant. It is assumed that this will be a routine mission, but during the course of the game the adventurers discover that there's more to their employers' story than they've been told. Each new stretch of road brings both danger and temptation, and how the adventurers respond could decide the fates of thousands.

Kingmaker is a fun adventure, but will require a little extra effort from the gamemaster, to achieve the game's full potential. This isn't a dungeon crawl: there aren't any maps or numbered encounter areas. Instead, the adventure unfolds over a series of encounters, the consequences of which will drive the course of the story.

Kingmaker is an engaging respite from the familiar dungeon quest that players are sure to enjoy. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Bookhounds of London*, Pelgrane Press, Supplement, $34.95, www.PelgranePress.com.** *Bookhounds of London* is a supplement for *Trail of Cthulhu*, the role-playing game of Lovecraftian horror from



Pelgrane Press. In a departure from *Trail of Cthulhu*'s scholars, antiquarians, and detectives, *Bookhounds of London* plunges players deep into the sordid world of that city's occult book trade. Taking a page from Arturo Pérez-Reverte's *The Club Dumas*, players assume the roles of forgers, thieves, hustlers, and bargainers in the business of buying, selling, and trading tomes of forbidden lore.

While there are plenty of stories in the Cthulhu Mythos featuring researchers who stumble upon the dreaded Necronomicon or the Book of Eibon only to find themselves shortly thereafter knee-deep in tentacles and indescribably squamous Elder Things, few, if any, tell the story of how those books came to be there in the first place. This is the meat of Bookhounds of London. As the titular bookhounds, the players are inevitably drawn deeper into the Mythos as they seek out the rare books their often unsavory customers require.

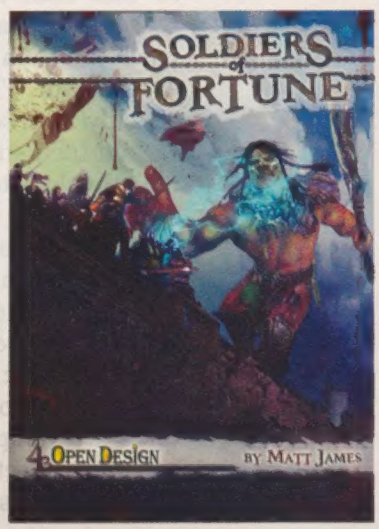
While the topic of London's occult book traders may seem a little esoteric to some readers, the author, respected Lovecraft researcher Kenneth Hite, does a fantastic job of fleshing out this world and the limitless possibilities of adventure it offers to those brave enough to venture forth. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

***Soldiers of Fortune*, Open Design LLC, Supplement, ISBN: 978-0-9843-1597-0, $18.95, www.KoboldQuarterly.com.**

Despite the central role that combat plays in *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game's focus has long been on small skirmishes between small groups: a party of adventurers versus a group of orcs, for example. As a topic, war has received little formal attention. Soldiers of Fortune, a new supplement from Open Design LLC, seeks to remedy that. Written by Matt James, a retired soldier and recipient of the Purple Heart and Bronze Star, *Soldiers of Fortune* offers an opportunity for characters to leave the dungeon and ply their trade upon the field of battle.

Players looking for a lot of "crunch" will love *Soldiers of Fortune*. The book offers new paragon paths, powers, and themes, making it easy to create a battle-ready character from scratch, or to augment the abilities of an existing character. Accompanying these are rules for creating magical banners and utilizing siege engines like trebuchets, cannons, and ballistae. However, this book is more than just stat blocks and new power descriptions: *Soldiers of Fortune* explores why individuals and nations go to war in the first place, and what it's like once they get there. As a combat veteran, the author brings an authoritative voice to the subject that gamers will appreciate.

Soldiers of Fortune includes some content that's specific to an included campaign setting called Midgard, but this content can still be adapted to one's own campaign with a minimum of effort. Anyone wanting to bring a martial element to their game will find that *Soldiers of Fortune* more than fits the bill. **Reviewed by Matt Staggs.**

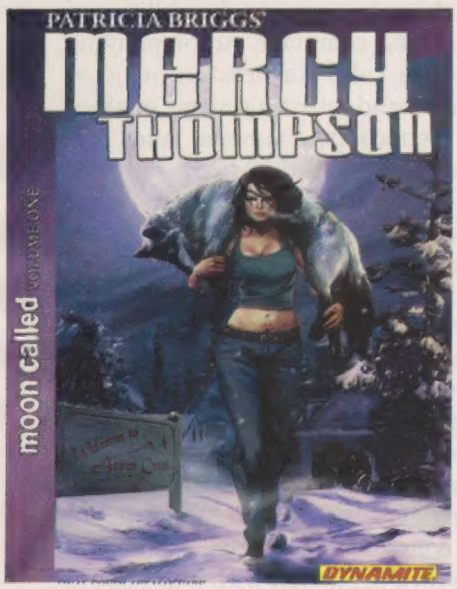


Graphic Novels

by Andrew Wheeler

In honor of *Realms of Fantasy*'s historic one hundredth issue, this month I have...[please pretend you hear a drumroll here]...two entirely unrelated books! Isn't that swell!

***Patricia Briggs' Mercy Thompson: Moon Called, Volume One*, written by Patricia Briggs and David Lawrence, artwork by Amelia Woo (Dynamite Entertainment, trade paperback, 128 pp., $16.99, ISBN 978-1-6069-0203-5).**



I've admitted, many times before, that adaptations rarely make much sense to me—what works well in one medium usually causes problems in another. And adapting a book into comics doesn't even provide the reader the *frisson* of seeing beloved characters come to "life"—they're still on the flat page, as they always were, just translated through someone else's imagination. But mine is clearly a minority view, since stories get adapted right and left—*A Game of Thrones* becomes a TV show, *Green Lantern* becomes a movie, *Spider-Man* becomes a musical, and Patricia Briggs's "Mercy Thompson" novels are now becoming comics.

This first volume adapts what seems to be the first half of the first book, *Moon Called*—working in the adapting-urban-fantasy-novels-into-comics vein established by the Laurell K. Hamilton and Jim Butcher machines, so that each eight-dollar novel becomes two seventeen-dollar collections—with a script by Lawrence from Briggs's novel, and stiff art from Amelia Woo. (The art varies wildly in quality, actually, with some excellent work, like the cover, and then stretches of four or five pages at a time that look to have been output straight from Poser.)

From the adaptation: Mercy Thompson is an auto mechanic in the less-traveled parts of Washington State, and also a walker, the last of her kind, who can transform into a coyote. Her world is a basic urban fantasy setup: we see fairies and werewolves, we'd bet a serious sum that there are vampires lurking around the corner, and we suspect that odder creatures (zombies, liches, demons, wendigo, what-have-you) will

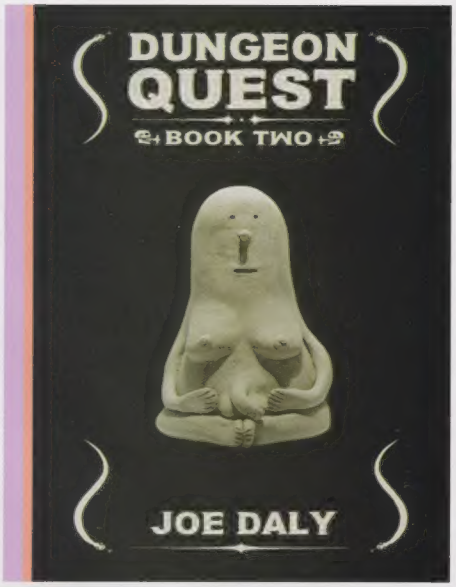
turn up if the series continues long enough. It's a world of possibilities and danger, and Mercy is the one tough woman in the center of it, with a relationship based on mutual respect with the local werewolf packs and a kick-butt attitude. One day, a young man—a newly turned werewolf—turns up on her doorstep, and she takes him in, even though he has clearly just run away from a nasty gang that captured and turned on him for some nefarious reason. By the time this book is done, the trouble has escalated from the local werewolf pack leader—whom Mercy, thankfully, does *not* have Unresolved Sexual Tension with—to the Grand Kahuna of all werewolves (actually called the Marrok), who, coincidentally, resides a short drive away. (And whose *son* Mercy has UST with.) It's all entirely serviceable but unsurprising, from top to bottom: a solid hunk of story in a popular genre, with art that works decently much of the time.

***Dungeon Quest, Book Two*, by Joe Daly (Fantagraphics Books, trade paperback, 136 pp., $12.99, ISBN 978-1-6069-9436-8).**

Dungeon Quest is something else entirely: a quest story in the dungeon-crawl tradition, which reads very much like the transcript of a laid-back gaming session among a bunch of old friends. The gaming metaphor is deliberate on Daly's part; he even provides statistics for his characters at various points along the way, and the loot they discover is important as well.

Four adventurers—Millennium Boy, Steve, Lash Penis, and Nerdgirl—are on a quest to find the scattered parts of the legendary Atlantean Resonator Guitar, with an additional subquest, in this volume, to find the prophet and poet Bromedes, to return his penis sheath. Along the way, they battle trolls and spiders, solve puzzles, wander through the Fireburg Forest, and do several kinds of drugs. It's clearly a several-generations-removed descendant of the old undergrounds, with the casual drug use, goofy artifact names and functions, and whatever-comes-next plotting, but it's all curiously sexless. (Nerdgirl is completely silent and takes very little part in the proceedings; she's like an NPC run by a particularly unimaginative DM.)

Daly's art, with its rounded figures and hand lettering, continues the organic, good-times feel of *Dungeon Quest*; we never get too close to any of these characters, but that's because they're just avatars to begin with—they're all just false faces assumed for some dice-rolling fun. This isn't explicitly a gaming comic, like *Knights of the Dinner Table* or *Dork Tower*; *Dungeon Quest* always remains entirely inside its world...it just likes to quantify that world in a way that makes more sense outside of that world than inside it. It's vastly better than any conversation that ever started "let me tell you about my character," though—it channels the essential fun of pretending to be someone else and running around killing whatever monsters pop up.



Next issue August 2011

Folkroots: A Brief History of Monsters

Artists Gallery: Women in Fantasy: The Images, The Artists

Movies: The Final Harry Potter

Reviews: Books, gaming, and more.

The Dragonslayer's Sword
www.resanelson.com

Available at
Amazon.com
Barnesandnoble.com
Mundaniapress.com

Additional Content at: www.rofmag.com